The focus of this course is the literary and visual culture of East Anglia in the later Middle Ages. East Anglia became the most vibrant region of medieval England, and culturally the most distinctive. Bounded on the north and east by the sea, and on the west by the marshland and swamp of the Fens, East Anglia was somewhat set apart and this contributed to its distinct identity. Norwich was the second city of England in size and importance, but many smaller towns across the region prospered through the booming cloth-trade. East Anglia was also the site of the great pilgrimage centres at Bury St Edmunds and at Walsingham, and witnesses both to an intense devotion and to heretical dissent. Mercantile success fuelled the building and decoration of churches still remarkable for their distinctive style and contents. A perceptibly East Anglian style marked the illuminated manuscripts produced in the region, from those illuminated in the Fenland monastic centres through to later productions characterized by daringly superabundant exuberance, naturalism and the grotesque.

Medieval East Anglia has also left an exceptional range of English writings. As well as such now well-known authors as Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe of Lynn, and John Lydgate, monk of Bury, there is particularly remarkable evidence of dramatic activity in The N-Town Cycle, The Digby Plays, The Macro Plays (The Castle of Perseverance, Wisdom, Mankind), The Brome Play of Abraham and Isaac, The Croxton Play of the Sacrament, and one surviving Norwich cycle play. The survival of the Paston Letters allows an unparalleled insight into the lives of a resolutely upwardly-mobile Norfolk family during violent and divided times in the fifteenth century. Authors like Osbern Bokenham in Suffolk and John Capgrave at Lynn witness to the range of interests and connections they can assume in their readers.

Geographically set apart, but with the confidence of affluence, medieval East Anglia displays much cultural independence. This course focusses on mutually illuminating interactions between East Anglian writing and East Anglian visual and material culture more largely, in order to explore the questions and tensions within this flamboyant late-medieval cultural flowering.

**Introductory Reading**

*Please read a selection from this list of Introductory Reading before the course begins. Sections from some of these studies will also be recommended for particular classes.*


Gibson, Gail McMurray, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1989).
Hill, Carole, *Women and Religion in Late Medieval Norwich* (Woodbridge, 2010)
Oliva, Marilyn, *The Convent and the Community in Late Medieval England: Female Monasteries in the Diocese of Norwich, 1350-1540* (Woodbridge, 1998)
Tanner, Norman, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich, 1370-1532* (Toronto, 1984)

The following are collections of essays by divers hands, which can introduce the range, and some specificities, of the topic

Bates, David and Liddiard, Robert (eds.), *East Anglia and its North Sea World in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2013)
Harper-Bill, Christopher (ed.), *Medieval East Anglia* (Woodbridge, 2005)
Virgoe, Roger, *East Anglian Society and the Political Community of Late Medieval England*, ed. Carol Barron et al. (Norwich, 1997)

The following are a selection of modern studies about particular works of medieval East Anglian visual culture which can prompt more general thinking about interactions between textual and material culture. Boundaries and borderlands of influence can be fuzzy: the Luttrell Psalter, associated with adjacent South Lincolnshire, shows East Anglian influence, as do the manuscripts produced for the Bohun family at their seat at Pleshey in Essex. In her *Gothic Manuscripts 1285-1385*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1986) Lucy Freeman Sandler characterizes the ‘East Anglian groups’ of manuscripts as showing ‘a broad stylistic current which in some ways is the antithesis of the Court Style in being bold rather than miniature in scale, energetic rather than elegant and earthy, even uncouth, rather than witty in attitudes towards nature’ (1.27-30).

Nichols, Ann Eljenholm, *Seeable Signs: The Iconography of the Seven Sacraments, 1350-1544* (Woodbridge, 1994)
Rimmer, Michael, *The Angel Roofs of East Anglia* (Cambridge, 2016)

**Class 1: Rethinking Christ’s Life**

‘I wolde have bene that tyme with Mary Mawdeleyne and with othere that were Crystes loverse’, writes Julian of Norwich. How did medieval East Anglians visualize meditatively the events of Christ’s life? This class explores how Christ’s life is reimagined across a range of genres, with a special focus on Mary Magdalene - ‘fallen woman’, intimate of Christ, evangelist and saint – and on the highly theologically-informed text from the Norfolk/Suffolk borders now called *The N-Town Play*, with its marked emphasis on the roles of women.

*The Passion Play from the N. Town Manuscript*, ed. Peter Meredith (London, 1990), or *The N-Town Play*, ed. S. Spector. EETS, s.s. 11, 12 (Oxford 1991)


The Digby Play of Mary Magdalene, in *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and E Museo 160*, ed. Donald C Baker et al. EETS, o.s. 283 (Oxford, 1983)


*Secondary Literature:*


Coletti, Theresa, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints* (Penn, 2004)


**Class 2: ‘Holy Maydens, Holy Wyfes’: Holiness, Husband and Household**

How were the cults of the most extraordinary women saints reinterpreted in later medieval East Anglia? In his ambitious life of St Katherine of Alexandria, the Lynn Augustinian friar John Capgrave explores the problematic challenges of education for a woman who craves learning and the life of the mind but has other responsibilities to
fulfil. The tensions of Kempe’s attempt to live out her vocation can be seen in the context of contemporary ideals of exemplary female lives and the recorded circumstances of some historical East Anglian women in their households. One focus here is on sanctity as the object of patronage and the subject of devotion and celebration.


Lives of St Katherine and St Margaret, in Osbern Bokenham, *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, ed. M.S. Serjeantson. EETS, o.s. 206 (Oxford, 1938)


*The Paston Women: Selected Letters*, trans. Diane Watt (Cambridge, 2004). [Of the 421 documents written by immediate Paston family members, 107 are written by Margaret Paston, the largest surviving set of personal writings by one woman in Middle English – this translated selection provides initial bearings for further exploration in the standard edition by Norman Davis et al.]


Secondary Literature:


Class 3: An East Anglian Incarnational Aesthetic? The Bodily and the Angelic

How are contemporary concerns reflected in East Anglian representations of the Holy Family and Holy Kinship, in pervasive East Anglian devotion to Mary, and the cult of St Anne as immaculate mother and as teacher of the Virgin?

The Mary Play from the N. Town Manuscript, ed. Peter Meredith (London, 1987)

The Life of St Anne, in Osbern Bokenham, Legendys of Hooly Wummen, ed. M.S. Serjeantson. EETS, o.s. 206 (Oxford, 1938)

Life of St Anne, in The Commonplace Book of Robert Reynes of Ace, ed. Cameron Louis (New York, 1980) [the commonplace book of a fifteenth-century Norfolk man; relevant extracts will be provided]


John Lydgate, Life of Our Lady, ed. J. Lauritis et al. (Pittsburgh, 1961) [extracts provided; ‘an incomparable flowering of devotional poetry which stuns expectation’ (Derek Pearsall)].

Secondary Literature

Ashley, K. and Sheingorn, P (eds.), Interpreting Cultural Symbols: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Society (Athens, Ga., 1990)

Gibson, Gail McMurray, Theater of Devotion, esp. ch. 1, ‘Fifteenth-Century Culture and the Incarnational Aesthetic’, and ch. 6, ‘Mary’s Dower: East Anglian Drama and the Cult of the Virgin’.

Class 4: Cult, Place and Memorialization

This class focusses on two of the major saints’ cults of medieval East Anglia, their texts and material culture. The Prioress’s Tale’s blood-libel story of the murder of a Christian child by Jews had a number of medieval English manifestations, including the legend of William of Norwich, a child supposedly murdered by the city’s Jews, which gave rise to a major local cult. (For another instance of antisemitism, see also the East Anglian Croxton Play of the Sacrament, in Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments, ed. Norman Davis, EETS, s.s. 1 (Oxford, 1970)).

The East Anglian king Edmund, murdered by Vikings in 869 and subsequently lavishly enshrined at Bury St Edmunds, became one of the most popular of native English saints and a great focus of devotion.


**Secondary Literature**

Bale, Anthony (ed.), *St Edmund King and Martyr: Changing Images of a Medieval Saint* (Woodbridge, 2009)


Pinner, Rebecca, *The Cult of St Edmund in Medieval East Anglia* (Woodbridge, 2015)