Edward III and the Hundred Year’s War
When “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” was written (circa 1350-1376), Edward III was king of England (1327-77). He valued chivalry and pageantry above all else, and established The Order of the Garter to reward men who shared his ideals.

Edward III’s reign was dominated by the Hundred Year’s War (1338-1453), which he instigated. The fighting was not constant, but interrupted by several years of truces. Prior to the 14th century, England was fighting to claim territory, but by the 14th and 15th centuries, they were fighting to claim the crown of France. England held an advantage for many years when it began to use the longbow, which lead to crushing victories over France in 1346 and 1356. Once France began using similar weaponry, England’s advantage was lost, and by 1377, England’s original holdings in southwest France had been drastically reduced.

The Black Death brings change
The Black Death (bubonic plague) devastated Europe between 1348-51, killing 25-40% of the population. Whole villages, monasteries, and towns were wiped out. The Plague, which originated in China and was transported by flea-ridden rats on ships to Europe, recurred frequently in England for the next 300 years.

The Plague changed two major sides of English society. The first was the way the land was farmed. Before the Plague, England was over-populated and feudal lords were powerful. Peasants were completely subservient. After the Plague, farm workers were a rare commodity. If landowners mistreated them, the worker would move on to be hired by other landowners who were desperate to hire them, no questions asked. After the Peasant’s Revolt in 1381, the feudal lords began parceling out their farm land and living off the rent rather than supervising the farming of their vast estates themselves.

The second change came in people’s perception of God. Prior to the Plague, God was loving and an object of devotion, but after the Plague, God was seen as God of judgment and retribution. There was also dissension within the church. From 1309-1377, the Pope resided in Avignon, France, rather than Rome, and in 1378, there were two popes, one in Avignon and an other in Rome.

The oral tradition
Most people in the Middle Ages were illiterate, so stories of great heroic deeds were passed down through oral tradition. Middle English literature began about 1200. The greatest works in Middle English were the works of Geoffrey Chaucer and Piers Plowman and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The Romance genre—stories of knights, fighting, adventures, and romantic love—were developed beginning in the late 12th century. One of the first books printed in England was Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte d’Arthur in 1485.

Arthur and his knights are waiting, like Fionn, in an enchanted sleep within a hill for the time when their services will be required.

J. A. MacCulloch Celtic Mythology

NOTE: Fionn’ was a great Irish folk hero, also known as Finn Mac Cumhal. According to legend, during the first centuries C.E. Finn ruled a race of giants called the Fianna, who were sworn to protect Ireland against all enemies. Among the Fianna were Conan and Oisin, Finn’s son. Oisin (also ‘Usheen’) left the Fianna and Ireland to marry Niam of the Golden Hair, daughter of the King of Teer-nan-nogue, the land beyond time and death. Your students would enjoy the tales of Finn and the Fianna. The legend of Oisin and his tragic return from Teer-nan-nogue is one of the most beautiful and touching stories in any culture.
The Time of the Twelves

Christmas in Medieval times was known as the Time of the Twelves. The celebration began on Christmas Eve and ended on Twelfth Night (Christmas Day to Epiphany, which fell on January 6). The traditions of the season were very ritualistic.

A good Christmas feast had at least twelve holiday foods. Twelve wassails were sung to the health of trees and people. Guests had to pass under the kissing bush twelve times, and each received and gave twelve gifts. The tables in the feasting hall were set for twelve revelers, and twelve candelabra or twelve groups of twelve candles provided light. Elaborate decorations of greenery grouped in twelves were held together by colorful ribbons, bows, and beads. Holly, the most important greenery, symbolized eternal life because it remained green all year and bore berries in the dead of winter. Later, these red berries came to represent the redeeming blood of Christ. Holly was also used during the Roman Saturnalia festival which began on December 17 and lasted for seven days. It was a season of goodwill known for its extravagant decadence in which masters and slaves met on equal terms.

The Time of the Bee

This time was also known as the Time of the Bee because bees labored for at least twelve hours each day all twelve months. The results of their labor, honey, was sweetness and light, which, during pagan times, reflected the joy of the season. With the emergence of Christianity, the church compared its life to that of the bee. The church itself was the hive in which its devoted followers labored ceaselessly for goodness. The “sweetness” was the teachings of Christ and the “light” was Christianity itself which brought understanding.

The Christmas Threshold and Yule Light

When guests entered the hall, they passed ceremoniously beneath the “kissing bush,” which was decorated with mistletoe and ever greenery. While the guests gave and received kisses, they were careful not to cross the “Christmas threshold,” a green line drawn near the high table. No one could cross the threshold until “First Foot” or “Lucky Bird” leaped over it. Before the feast began, a man called the “surveyor” cried out, “Wassail!” The guests then sat quietly while the surveyor asked the most honored guest seated at the high table whether the feast could begin. The guest replied, “No! Not until First Foot crosses the Christmas threshold!”* Immediately a dark-haired man dressed in green and wearing bells around his ankles entered the hall. He skipped and danced his way to the high table carrying an evergreen bough. His joyful leap over the threshold symbolized letting in the joy of Christmas. As a result, everyone present enjoyed good luck all the year long.

After First Foot leaped over the Christmas threshold, a fanfare sounded and the Yule Candle was lit. Typically, this was an enormous candle of different colors, including some of the wax from the previous year’s candle. It took twelve months to make and was decorated with twelve thin, metal ornaments. Its base was decorated with holly in bunches of twelve. If a single candle wasn’t used, twelve tapers were bound together and placed in a shallow dish and decorated.

Once the Yule Candle was lit, the Yule Log, a gigantic log that would burn for twelve days, was placed in the hearth and lit. A small piece of the log was saved to burn the following year. The tradition of passing on the light of the Yule Candle and Yule Log served as a reminder that the spirit of Christmas lasted throughout the year and was merely rekindled during the twelve days of Christmas.

Traditional foods

A fanfare announced the arrival of frumenty, a sweet dish of egg, wheat, boiled milk, honey, and spices. Also popular was posset, a thicker version of our eggnog. Yule dolls, gingerbread people, were eaten with pear wine called perry. Also popular were plum pudding, mince pie, roasted peacock, and humble pie. Humble pie was made from tripe and enjoyed by rich and poor alike, which is why it was called “humble” pie. Today, of course, eating “humble pie” has an entirely different meaning.

Another popular food was roast wild pig. The boar’s head, which was roasted separately, was presented with great ceremony during the feast, placed on a tray decorated with greenery, with an apple, orange, or lemon in its mouth. The boar’s head carol was sung as the tray was marched throughout the feasting hall.

Traditional games

Between courses, guests sang wassails, enjoyed mummers, or they played games. Some of the most popular were Bee in the Middle, Blind Man’s Buff, and Hunt the Slipper. Bee in the Middle was actually a variation of a pagan animal sacrifice called Bull in the Middle in which the sacrifice of this sacred animal ensured that strength and goodness endured on earth.

*This description adapted from Medieval Holidays and Festivals: A Calendar of Celebrations by Madeleine Pelner Cosman.
King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table

King Arthur

Like many mythical heroes, King Arthur’s origins are mysterious. First mentioned by name in the 9th century by Nennius, he is described as the leader of several kings who fought against the Saxons. Twelve times they chose Arthur as their leader, and together they fought twelve battles. Their final battle was at Mount Badon, where Arthur single-handedly killed 900 men.

Geoffrey of Monmouth (1100-54) relates the legend of Arthur as it was known in South Wales, which is generally how his legend is told today. Arthur’s parents were Uther Pendragon and Igraine (Igraine). Geoffrey describes Arthur’s victories carrying Pridwen, his shield, and Caliburnus (Excalibur), his sword, which was crafted in Avalon. He writes of Arthur’s battles with Mordred the Usurper, and of his death and transport to Avalon, after which Constantine became king. Arthur’s wife, Guanhumara (Gwenhwyfar, Guinevere) spent the remainder of her days in a nunnery. (Stories of Sir Lancelot did not emerge until Anglo-Norman writers in the late 12th and early 13th centuries developed the Arthurian Romances.)

The Knights of the Round Table

The Round Table was a gift to Arthur from Merlin, his mentor, on the day of Arthur’s wedding to Guinevere. Merlin led Arthur, Guinevere, and the lords and ladies of the court into a beautiful pavilion decorated with gilded walls and lovely paintings of saints and angels. In the center of the pavilion was a magnificent Round Table with seats for fifty people.* At each place was a gold chalice of wine and a gold plate with a slice of white bread.

Merlin pointed to a high seat that was beautifully wrought and gilded. Merlin called it the Seat Royal, which was to be considered the center of the Round Table. This was to be Arthur’s seat, and as Merlin explained this, “Arthur, King” appeared in golden letters upon the back of the seat.

Arthur was very moved by this wondrous gift and asked Merlin to search out enough worthy knights to fill every seat at the table. Merlin warned Arthur to be patient because when all of the seats of the Round Table were filled, the kingdom and Arthur’s rule would reach its peak and then fall into decline. Arthur accepted this as the natural way of things, thus proving to Merlin that he was indeed a worthy king.

Across from the Seat Royal was the Seat Perilous, which was the last seat to be filled. It would remain empty, waiting for the one man who was worthy to sit there, and, at the time of Arthur’s wedding, that man had not yet been born. It was called the Seat Perilous because, if anyone who was unworthy sat in the chair, he would die or suffer a terrible misfortune. This seat became Sir Galahad’s, Lancelot’s son.

There were 32 original members of the Round Table chosen by Merlin that day. Among them were King Pellinore, Sir Gawain, Sir Ewaine, Sir Pellias, Sir Kay, and Sir Bedevere. (See page 144 in The Story of King Arthur and his Knights by Howard Pyle for an accounting of all 32 knights, and the remainder of the book for beautiful illustrations and stories.) As each knight was chosen, his name appeared in gold on the back of his seat. Arthur noticed that the seat on his right hand remained empty. Merlin explained that soon a knight would come who would surpass all men in strength, beauty, and grace. That knight was Sir Lancelot.

After all 32 knights were seated, their squires stood behind them holding each knight’s coat of arms. All of the knights rose as one and each held the cross of the hilt of his sword as he spoke the covenant of the Knighthood of the Round Table.

Repeating after Arthur, they swore

“That they would be gentle unto the weak; that they would be courageous unto the strong; that they would be terrible unto the wicked and the evil-doer; that they would defend the helpless who should call upon them for aid; that all women should be held unto them sacred; that they would stand unto the defense of one another whensoever such defense should be required; that they would be merciful unto all men; that they would be gentle of deed, true in friendship, and faithful in love.”

(The Story of King Arthur and his Knights by Howard Pyle, page. 146)

Each man kissed the hilt of his sword and raised his voice in exultation. Then they all sat down to break bread, drink wine, and give thanks. And so it was that The Ancient and Honorable Companions of the Round Table was established.

Celtic echoes in Author’s legend

In many ways the legend of Arthur parallels earlier legends of Celtic heroes, in particular Finn Mac Cumhal of Ireland, leader of the Fianna (see note on page 56).

* Stories of the Grail and the Round Table did not appear until 1155 in Wace’s Brut, which says that Arthur asked that the Round Table be built to prevent quarrels of precedence among his knights. Layamon, circa 1200, says that the Round Table seated 1600.

The Hero’s Journey: A Guide to Literature and Life
Sir Gawain

Gawain was the greatest of King Arthur’s knights. He had the most adventures and never returned from a quest without completing it. He was the best horseman, spoke eloquently, and was the most gracious toward guests and strangers.

Many of Sir Lancelot’s adventures were originally attributed to Gawain. In fact, originally Gawain was probably Guinevere’s lover. He was also the original hero of the quest for the Holy Grail before that honor passed on to Perceval, then Lancelot, and finally Sir Galahad.

Gawain was the king’s nephew, son of King Lot of Orkney and Arthur’s half sister, Morgause. Mordred the Usurper was his half brother. It is believed that Gawain and Mordred could have been Arthur’s sons by Mor-
gause. Whether this is so, it is certain that Gawain was heir to the throne, and held in the highest regard by Ar-
thur. In some stories, Arthur even gave his beloved sword, Excalibur, to Gawain.

When Sir Lancelot was developed (late 12th to early 13th centuries), he and Gawain were great friends. When Guinevere was abducted by Meiwas, both Lance-
lot and Gawain set out to rescue her. The earliest ac-
counts of this tale have Gawain rescuing the queen, but in later stories, it is Lancelot.

However, Gawain’s relationship with Lancelot soured after Lancelot’s betrayal with Guinevere. Several of the Knights of the Round Table broke away from Ar-
thur to follow Lancelot when he was banished. Gawain’s anger, inflamed by Mordred, drove him to challenge Lancelot repeatedly. Legend has it that they fought fiercely for hours. Arthur, who loved them both, was too heart sick to watch. Finally, Gawain fell, but Lancelot refused to kill him. Gawain vowed to return to continue the duel when his wounds healed. Over and over Gawain returned to challenge Lancelot, and each time Lancelot struck him down, but refused to kill him. Lancelot took to pacing the ramparts all day long as he waited for Gawain to heal and return to reissue his challenge.

One day, Arthur and his knights abandoned their siege, broke camp, and left. Lancelot was startled by this uncharacteristic behavior. When he discovered that Ar-
thur and Gawain had left because Mordred was chal-
lenging the throne, Lancelot and his knights rode to their aid.

Eventually Gawain and Lancelot reconciled, but it was too late. Arthur had fallen at Camlan and the Knights of the Round Table were together no more.

NOTE: Two other stories about Gawain which you or your students might enjoy are “Gawain and the White Hart” and “Gawain and the Magic Chess Board.”