

## Medieval Literature

### Introduction

Medieval English literature is commonly dated between 1100/1200 and 1500, or more precisely between 1066 (Battle of Hastings) and 1509 (death of Henry VII and accession of Henry VIII). Middle Ages to early Renaissance in English history is a period of military struggle, political and religious unrest, increasing nationalistic spirit and the consolidation of a national identity in social affairs, politics, religion, language, arts.

### Medieval English Literature's View

Medieval literature is a period based on the view that the human and natural worlds are divinely determined and are interrelated in the scheme of mystical and sacred things the human being must aspire to (the idea is expressed in, among others, William Langland's *Piers Plowman*). More often, however, the medieval writer is torn between, or rather interconnects, the divine and the secular, the sacred and the profane, religious authority and human will, doctrine and originality, ideology and creativity, didacticism and self-expression (this situation is better revealed in romances and in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*).

### Medieval Prose, Poetry and Drama

Medieval English literature was a period of prose and poetry, literary history adding to these two already established genres the third one, which is drama. The prose of medieval English literature receives its distinction from the writing of chronicles and prose romances, John Wycliffe's sermons and translation of the Bible, Sir John Mandeville's travel book, and Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. In poetry it was the period of metrical romances, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and such poetry as William Langland's *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman*. Medieval poetry flourished in Chaucerian period between 1350 and 1400, whereas in the fifteenth-century, along with some imitations of Chaucer, English literature had Lydgate, Hoccleve, and popular ballads. Concerning medieval drama, there were the great cycles of mystery plays that flourished first, followed by morality plays, and the appearance of the interlude in the last years of the fifteenth-century, the last decades of the fifteenth-century English literature already showing the existence of a strongly secularised dramatic tradition.

### Medieval English Literature's Periods

Medieval English literature is diachronically conceived in **three** major periods, each representing a distinct phase in the whole history of English literature. The first one followed the Norman Conquest that provided the replacement of an English-speaking ruling class by a French speaking one, and offered to English writing French models to be followed, and is commonly referred to as "**The Anglo-Norman Literature**". The second period originated roughly around 1350 in the supplanting of French by Middle English as the language of court, which gave among other things the appearance of definitely English writings, and which is commonly referred to as "**The Age of Chaucer**". The third period, which is referred to as just "**The Fifteenth Century**", is a weak literary age when compared to the previous two ones, and especially to that of Geoffrey Chaucer and his epoch, although towards its end England possessed a language close to Modern English and its literature a strong dramatic tradition.

## **The Anglo-Norman Literature**

The Norman Conquest put an end to serious literary works in Old English language and gave the rise to Anglo-Norman literature, commonly dated between 1100/1200 and 1350s, and considered to be the first phase in the development of English literary phenomena during the Middle Ages. The starting point is taken to be the Hastings Battle of 1066, marking the beginning of the Norman Conquest, and for almost two centuries the further development of English society, culture, and literature was dependent on French politics, French culture, French literary productions, and French language. The conquered island spoke the Old English in three distinct forms – West Saxon in the south, Northumbrian in the north, and Mercian in the Midlands – and the French. The vernacular Old English was the language of the oppressed Saxons, which soon, in its natural progression, integrated French words, lost its forms, and the Mercian, covering London, the capital and the place of government, and Oxford, the centre of learning, became the standard language and spread throughout the country. The French was the language of the court, transactions, public documents, and literary works.

### **Major Writers of the Anglo-Norman Literature**

The period gave a number of chroniclers, among whom William of Malmesbury (c.1080/1095-1143), who wrote around 1120 *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (“Deeds of the Kings of England”), covering the period of 449-1127; Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1100-1155), the author of another Latin work – *Historia Regum Britanniae* („The History of the Kings of Britain“, c.1136) – and the founder of the Arthurian legend; Matthew Paris (c.1200-1259), who wrote *Chronica Majora*, about England and Continent, starting from 1235, and *Chronica Minora*, about England between 1200 and 1250. Besides chronicles, the prose of the Anglo-Norman period gave at the beginning of the thirteenth-century *The Ancren Riwle* („The Anchoresses“ Rule“), written in Old English. Roger Bacon (c.1214-1294) produced, sometime around 1250, his philosophical writings *Opus Majus* (dealing with the relationship between philosophy and theology), *Opus Minus* (a continuation of the previous, to which a discussion on the faulty interpretation of the Bible is included), and *Opus Tertium* (a scientific work). The poetry of the time includes *Ormulum* (c.1180) by Orm, the early thirteenth-century *Brut* (c.1215) by Layamon, *Bestiary* (anonymous authorship), *Poema Morala* (“Moral Ode“, c.1200), *The Cuckoo Song* (the oldest known English folk poem, dating from the thirteenth-century), *The Owl* and *the Nightingale* (c.1250), and others.

### **The Age of Chaucer**

On the literary level, the period of English history called “Chaucer’s Epoch“, covering the second half of the fourteenth-century, produced both poetry and prose, of which the great examples are the fourteenth-century poem entitled *The Land of Cockayne*, the famous alliterative poem *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman* ascribed to William Langland (c.1332-1400), and the famous romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. A special place is given to the poet John Gower (1330-1408), Chaucer’s contemporary and friend, who wrote *Speculum Meditantis* (in French), *Vox Clamantis* (in Latin), and *Confessio Amantis* (in English, representing a collection of 133 tales, some of which romances, written around 1386), and who for centuries was considered to be Chaucer’s rival in artistic eloquence and narrative art. Concerning the foundation of English prose in the fourteenth-century, one cannot omit John Wycliffe’s (c.1320-1384) first translation of the Bible, and *Voyages and Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (also known as ‘Mandeville’s Travels’, ‘The Book of Sir John Mandeville’, and ‘The Travels of Sir John Mandeville’) by Sir John Mandeville, one of the most popular vernacular texts of the Middle Ages and the most famous medieval travel-book, written in Anglo-Norman French around 1350 and published between 1357 and 1371.

The period is entirely governed by Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400) and his writings. Son of a prosperous London wine merchant, Chaucer is really the first great poet of English literature, never a captive of any special moral, political, or social idea, or of any set of manners. Chaucer lived through the outbreak of bubonic plague, the so-called "Black Death", which killed a large fraction of English population in 1348, known also as "The Year of the Plague". It is not known exactly where he was educated, probably in Thames Street, up the river from London Bridge on the northern bank, where his parents lived and where he was probably born. However, some time in his teens, he entered the household of Prince Lionel, later Duke of Clarence. Chaucer was a page at the court to Elizabeth, Prince Lionel's wife. In October 1359, Chaucer accompanied the Prince's forces into France, which were part of English army that the Prince's father, the king Edward III, took to Continent. There Chaucer was taken prisoner, but was ransomed in March of 1360 and returned to England in May of the same year. By 1366 Chaucer was married to Philippa Roet, one of Queen's ladies (Philippa's sister, Katherine, was mistress and later wife of John of Gaunt, Chaucer's patron), and from 1367 Chaucer was an esquire of the royal household with a regular pension. He was with the King's army in France again in 1369, this time with John of Gaunt, and later in Italy (1372-73), where he may have met Petrarch, but probably not also Boccaccio. Diplomatic missions to Flanders and France followed in 1377 and to Milan in 1378, holding, at the same time, high positions in the services of two kings (Edward III and Richard II). Chaucer died on 25 October 1400 and was buried in the chapel of St Benedict in Westminster Abbey.

Geoffrey Chaucer's literary activity is divided in three periods: French, Italian, and English. His French period (until 1372) includes a translation of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose* (about 22000 verses) into English as *The Romaunt of the Rose*. The period also includes *The Book of the Duchess* (1369), written as an elegy for Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster and John of Gaunt's first wife, who died of plague in that year, and *Complaynt unto Pite* (1369). The Italian period (1372-1386) was influenced by Petrarch and Boccaccio, and produced *Lyf of Saint Cecyle*, *The Story of Constance*, *Complaynt to His Lady*, *Anelida and Arcite*, *The House of Fame* (a dream vision), *The Parliament of Fowls*, and *Troilus and Criseyde* (his greatest work until 1385, a poem in "rhyme royal", considered by critics the first novel in English). The last, English period (1386-1400), is that of Chaucer's masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales* (c.1387).

## **Fifteenth Century Literature**

Many scholars refer to the 15th century as a "barren time" for English literature, but that is not necessarily true. Chaucer's *oeuvre* had been such a monumental contribution in the century before that anything written afterwards seemed to pale in significance.

The fifteenth century was called the "Century of the Ballad" as Chaucerians (or followers of Chaucer's work) both in England and Scotland composed some beautiful ballads including the "Ballad of Chevy Chase" and the Robin Hood Ballads. It was the Scottish poets (King James I of Scotland, Robert Henryson, William Dunbar and Gavin Douglas) that emerged from this period. The English Chaucerians of note were John Lydgate, Thomas Hoccleve and John Skelton.

Though there were no great poets of note as in the previous century, dramatic plays began to take more important a part in literature of the times. There were the miracle plays, the morality plays and the mystery plays. The miracle plays were simply liturgical dramas on scriptural subjects or perhaps episodic sequences in the life of a saint which were enacted usually in an outside square or venue for everyone to view. The mystery plays were plays that were enacted by the clergy and were of biblical themes. The morality play was usually a play

where virtue and vice were personified as characters. There was also the introduction of the “Interlude” play. This was a short work that was lighthearted and was usually placed between the acts of a longer morality or miracle play. The interlude was a device that was introduced by John Heywood and his *Four P’s* was very popular with audiences. Though the plays during this period were mostly plays with religious messages, they were to give way to more sophisticated and secular works in the century to follow.

Despite the fact that this century was not distinguished by great poetry, toward the end of the century it produced one of the greatest prose works of early English literature: *Le Morte d’Arthur* by Thomas Malory. This is considered to be the first novel ever written in the English language. The interesting fact about this novel is that it was probably written in prison where Malory was serving time for various and sundry offenses he had committed (some that were reportedly connected to the Lancaster-York war). He was indeed a “knight” who came from a noble background and the power of this novel is in how he is able to create this magical world from a prison and how despite his own life being the antithesis of chivalric, he crafted a work based on truth, fealty, honor and glory. Malory’s work has inspired countless modern novels and movies. His influence is still evident centuries after he penned a novel while serving time.

<b>Check your understanding</b>
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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. List three major literary works belonging to English Medieval Literature.</li><li>2. Why fifteenth century English literature is considered ‘barren’?</li><li>3. The Age of Chaucer is considered significant. Why?</li></ol> |
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