

Module: Literary Texts

Level : 2nd year

Teacher: Dr. Nassima Amirouche

Lecture 1: British Medieval Literature

Objectives:

- Understanding the medieval period, including its social, political, and cultural contexts
- Tracing the evolution of the English language over centuries.
- Developing critical thinking skills by analyzing complex literary works
- Comparing medieval literature with other literary periods or cultural traditions.
- Exploring medieval social hierarchies, gender roles, and class structures through literature.
- Appreciating timeless themes such as heroism, love, honor, and morality.

Introduction

Although there is no official consensus regarding the exact beginning and end of the Medieval Period, it is most commonly associated with the collapse of the Roman Empire, around the 5th century, and leading up all the way to the 15th century, which is widely considered (though the exact beginning is disputed) the beginning of the Renaissance Period. This time period is commonly known as *The Middle Ages* was commonly regarded by Renaissance thinkers as “The Dark Ages.”

The Middle Ages can be split up into three periods: the Early Middle Ages, the High Middle Ages, and the Late Middle Ages.

The Early Middle Ages typically signify the beginning of the Medieval Era with the fall of Rome and continue until sometime in the 11th century. Anglo-Saxon tribes invaded England around 450 and they had a vast effect on literature. The language of these invaders is classified as Old English and is widely represented in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Old English poetry was passed down orally before it was written.

The early literature of the Anglo-Saxon period mostly took the form of lengthy epic poems praising the deeds of heroic warriors. These poems reflected the reality of life at this time, which was often brutal. However, the context in which these poems were delivered was certainly not grim. In the great mead halls of kings and nobles, Anglo-Saxons would gather on special occasions to celebrate in style. They feasted on pies and roasted meats heaped high on

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platters, warmed themselves before a roaring fire, and listened to *scops*—professional poets—bring the epic poems to life. Strumming a harp, the *scop* would chant in a clear voice that carried over the shouts and laughter of the crowd, captivating them for hours on end with tales of courage, high drama, and tragedy.

This is an example quoted in *Beowulf*:

Down the road. And sometimes a proud old soldier who had heard songs of the ancient heros and could sing them all through, story after story, would weave a net of words for Beowulf's victory, tying the knot of his verses smoothly, swiftly, into place with a poet's quick skill, singing his new song aloud while he shaped it, and the old songs as well...

What is described in these lines is probably very similar to the circumstances under which the poem was originally composed. Anglo-Saxon poetry was an oral art. Poems were not written down until a much later period. Poems were sung, frequently to the accompaniment of a harp. Poets recited well-known poems from memory and at times created new ones.

The professional poet, or *scop*, had a very important function in this society. He was the memory and historian of the tribe. It was he who remembered the important heroes, the kings, the important battles, and the folklore of the tribe. The oral nature of the poetry probably necessitated a strong beat and alliteration. These poetic devices not only aided the memory, they were the necessary raw materials for free invention. New songs, such as the one that the soldier sings in the passage above, were made out of old matter.

The two most important traditions of Anglo-Saxon poetry were the *heroic tradition* and the *elegiac tradition*, which mourns the passing of earlier, better times. Onto these traditions were grafted Christian beliefs, which gradually replaced pagan ones. Of the 30,000 lines of Anglo-Saxon poetry that remain to us, the most important single poem is the epic *Beowulf*. Of the great elegiac lyrics, the personal, dramatic "Seafarer" is a good example. It may be that the poems to have survived are the ones that appealed to the monks who finally committed them to writing. There are, however, some light and witty riddles in the early manuscripts that may call this theory into question. To the Anglo-Saxon, the riddle was an intellectual exercise.

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Bede, the venerable (673-735)

Bede, the Venerable, was the earliest historian of England and the earliest important prose writer. He was a contemporary of the unknown author of *Beowulf*. Bede, who was a monk, was known in his own day as a man of great scholarship and learning. His books were read and copied all over Europe. The title "Venerable" was added to his name in recognition of his reputation for wisdom, humility, and scholarship. He seems to have travelled little and spent most of his life, beginning at the age of seven, at the monastery of Jarrow. Bede's *History of the English Church and People* was originally written in Latin. However, the translation into Old English, undertaken in the reign of King Alfred the Great, became a classic and helped the people of the emerging English nation to take pride in their past. The *History* itself is more than a chronicle of events. It also contains legends, lives of saints, local traditions, and stories. One can get a fairly accurate picture of the daily life of the people from Bede's history.

Beowulf:

English literature begins with *Beowulf*. It is England's heroic epic, a proper beginning for a national literature, but it belongs to everyone because it is profoundly human. The poem shapes and interprets materials connected with the tribes from northern Europe, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, who invaded England after the Romans left in the fifth century. Their tribal history is in the poem. It is a history of festering pride, loud talk, and drunken violence, of spies, bloody borders, and raids. But against this dark background the poem presents another kind of history. It is a history in which a stranger comes openly to help rather than covertly to kill and loot, in which eating and drinking and speaking and gift-giving are natural ceremonies uniting young and old, in which heroic strength is wise and generous.

The only surviving manuscript of *Beowulf* dates from around 1000, but the work itself was probably composed sometime during the eighth century. The poem, which recounts the exploits of third- or fourth-century Geats and Danes, is doubtless based on earlier unwritten stories that had been passed from generation to generation by word of mouth. The Anglo-Saxons of Britain shared a common group of heroes with other Germanic peoples, and the hero *Beowulf* certainly has his origins in an earlier, pagan era. The author of the written version that has come down to us seems to have been a Christian. The language of this

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version is Old English: The translation you will read in Modern English is by the poet Burton Raffel.

The High Middle Ages are thought to have begun around the Norman Invasion. Linguistically, this era brought about the transition from Old English to Middle English, feudalism, and the Medieval “romance” which came from the French speaking Anglo-Normans. Romances characteristically revolve around similar themes of members of the lower nobility trying to rise in status, the young entering adulthood and their fears, and individuals being cast out of society and returning as part of a stronger unit. The most popular romantic figure of this time is the character of King Arthur who arose in the 13th century. The Arthurian romance contains the chivalric code, involving knights, adventure, and honor.

Other popular romances of this time include Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, and William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*.

The Late Middle Ages mark the end of the Medieval era, which is estimated to have ended around 1485, the year Henry VII ascended to the throne, and the Tudor dynasty began. This era contained the Hundred Years War, which ended in 1453, and the Black Death, which eliminated nearly one-third of Europe’s population. In 1485, William Caxton introduced England to the art of printing books, when he published Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur*.

Role of Religion

According to the History Learning Site, the Church was absolutely the most important part of medieval society. “The Church dominated everybody’s lives.” The only religion that existed was Christianity. All medieval people, regardless of their social rank, believed in God, Heaven, and Hell, however it was strongly believed that the only way they could get to Heaven is if the Roman Catholic Church allowed them. Similar to today, Hell was depicted as every person’s worst nightmare, and Heaven was eternal paradise.

There are many reasons that the Church was so dominant during medieval times, but a main reason is its extreme wealthiness. The Church made money any way they could, but they

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made majority of their money through tithes. A tithe is a tax that is one tenth of a persons yearly earnings or goods that had to be given to the Church. Peasants obviously found it very difficult to pay tithes because they have trouble making even enough money for themselves, so they had to pay with seeds or grain. It was not an option to not pay a tithe because it was told that the punishment of not paying a tithe would result in eternal damnation. Other ways the Church became so wealthy was their constant charges for receiving sacraments. If one wanted to be baptized, married, or buried there was a charge, and someone becoming baptized and being buried on Holy Ground was another way to get to Heaven. Marriage was very different in the medieval ages. Married couples were not allowed to live together because it was viewed as a sin. With all of this income from basically every person in society the Church was extremely well-off, and to keep the Church as wealthy as possible they did not have to pay any taxes. It is said that The Church was wealthier than any king in the world during this time period, and they saved most of their money. However, the money that they did spend was on their structures such as churches or cathedrals.

The actual structure of the Church was the center of all community activities. People would perform plays and there were always markets held outside of the Church. The Church was viewed as having the answers to everything and anything that would happen, especially when something bad happened. If there was a bad storm or an outbreak of disease, the church was supposed to know why. The language of the Church, Latin, was the only common language spoken in all of Europe. Anyone who did not know Latin would not be able to communicate. This just proves how important the Church truly was. They determined the language of an entire continent. The Church held entirely all of the power in medieval times, and was very well-respected.