

English Language and Literature

The Middle Ages, 1996

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During most of the Middle Ages, the preferred language for writing, in England as well as in other western European countries, was Latin. Latin was the language of the Roman Church. Especially before 1100, educated people—rulers and officials as well as churchmen—used Latin for most of their official work. However, they learned their Latin in school or from tutors, as a second language. The language people learned when growing up, which differed according to where they lived, was known as the vernacular. In England, the vernacular went through several stages of development before it became Modern English.

The oldest form of the English vernacular is the language brought to Britain in the 400s by its Germanic invaders—the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. Their language—Old English—is also called ANGLO-SAXON, and it remained the language of most of England until the NORMAN conquest in 1066. The word English comes from Engle, the Anglo-Saxon word for Angle. There are many surviving manuscripts written in Anglo-Saxon from this period—more than in any other vernacular of the early Middle Ages.

After the Norman conquest, England had two vernaculars—the Norman French spoken by the new overlords and the English spoken by the common people. Latin remained the language of the church, but for more than 300 years French became the language of England's royal court, its law, and its government. The English written during this period began to be influenced by Norman French, and it is known as Middle English.

In 1204, the English kings lost Normandy to France and became less influenced by French ways. Gradually the two vernaculars began to mix. It was a slow process. The first king to speak English rather than French as his first language was Henry IV, who came to the throne in 1399. But by 1500, English had changed enough for us to call it Modern English—the language of William Shakespeare and Ernest Hemingway.

A Gift From God

Caedmon was an uneducated cowherd who worked in an abbey. One night, as he was sleeping in the cowshed, he had a vision in which he was commanded to sing of the Creation. The following morning, he sang these lines to the abbess and the brethren:

“Now it is our duty to praise the Guardian of the heavenly kingdom, the Maker’s might and purpose, the acts of the Glory-Father, just as He, the eternal Lord, established the origin of everything wondrous. He the holy Creator, first created heaven as a roof for the children of men; then the Guardian of mankind, the eternal Lord, the almighty God, later fashioned the land, middle earth, for men.”

The abbess and the learned brethen agreed that Caedmon's hymn was a gift from God.

Old English (Anglo-Saxon)

There are 400 manuscripts surviving from the Middle Ages that preserve Anglo-Saxon literature. Most of this was written for very practical purposes. The leaders of the Christian church wanted its teachings to be understood by the less educated—especially by beginning students in school—but knew that these people could not read Latin. Much of the writing in Old English is quite accomplished. It also records some of the old oral poetry of the Anglo-Saxon peoples and some original writing in Anglo-Saxon poetic style.

Poetry

Anglo-Saxon poetry is largely anonymous. It is preserved in very few documents, and the names of the poets are rarely indicated. In fact, we know the names of only three Anglo-Saxon poets—Caedmon, Aidhelm, and Cynewulf. Caedmon, the best known of the three, is the only one credited with one of the Anglo-Saxon poems that survive, a nine-line Hymn in praise of God. He lived at an abbey at Whitby in northern England in the 600s, and he has been called “the father of English poetry.” According to the medieval English historian BEDE, Caedmon “sang about the creation of the world, the origin of the human race, and many stories taken from the sacred Scriptures.”

The most famous Old English poems are those that deal with the heroic past of the Anglo-Saxons. Beowulf, a poem of more than 3,000 lines, is considered the first major poem in the English language. Set in Scandinavia in the distant past, it gives a vivid picture of old Germanic life, as it tells the story of Beowulf’s successful fights with three monsters. Many scholars have compared it to Homer’s Iliad.

Beowulf and other Old English poems do not use rhyme as a regular feature. Instead they are characterized by their strong rhythms and by their use of alliteration*. For example, there is a poem called The Battle of Maldon, about an Anglo-Saxon hero who died fighting the Vikings in 991. Near the end, one of his oldest supporters says: “Though I am feeble I will not flee, But by my beloved lord I will lie forever.”

Many Anglo-Saxon poems have religious subjects. There are four long narrative poems about saints’ lives. One of them—Juliana—tells about the life and death of the virgin martyr of Nicomedia who sacrificed her life to defend her Christian beliefs. The poem focuses on a series of debates between Juliana and the devil, who visits her in prison.

Other debate poems have also survived. The longest is Christ and Satan, presenting the conflict when Satan tempts Christ during 40 days in the wilderness. Another debate poem, Solomon and Saturn, is a dialogue between the wise Jewish king from Bible times (Solomon) and the pagan god Saturn, who is presented as a magician.

One of the most beautiful of the Old English poems is the Dream of the Rood*, a meditation about the cross of Christ. In the poem, a jeweled cross speaks to a dreamer about what the cross

means and how it helps sinners, and the dreamer decides to place his trust in the cross. The poem ends with a vision of the Kingdom of Heaven, where the dreamer hopes he will one day join his friends who have died. A similar, shorter poem presenting a speech by the cross is carved in RUNES on an outdoor stone cross that is still standing today in Northumbria in northern England.

Prose

Much more Old English prose has survived than poetry. Some of the writing shows great skill. The best-known writer of Old English prose is ALFRED THE GREAT, king of the West Saxons from 871 to 899. Most of his writing involved translating and adapting books from Latin into Old English. Among the translations and adaptations credited to him are Pope GREGORY THE GREAT's *The Book of Pastoral Care*, a manual for parish priests; St. AUGUSTINE'S *Soliloquies*; and the Ecclesiastical History of the English People by Bede.

Among the most accomplished types of original prose writing to survive are informal SERMONS known as homilies. The best of these use rhythmical alliteration that is almost like Anglo-Saxon poetry. Two of the greatest homily writers were Aelfric, abbot of Eynsham, and Wulfstan, archbishop of York. Aelfric's homilies were so popular that scribes* continued to copy them into the 1200s.

Other Old English prose includes lives of saints, BIBLE translations, handbooks, treatises, tracts, medical texts, laws, monastery rules, legal documents, charters, and wills. One of the most notable prose works is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a record of important public events first kept in King Alfred's reign and continued almost to 1100.

Middle English

After the Norman conquest, French became the language of the court, the upper classes, the law courts, and the schools. French joined Latin as a language of government and law. Increasingly, however, the nobles began to speak English as well as French and Latin—especially if they married English wives. When the Normans spoke English, they naturally used many French words and ways of speaking.

The English spoken by the common people, which had many regional dialects*, began to absorb French words from their rulers. As English slowly became the main language of the nobles, French words and grammatical habits became even more common. There was a great mixing of different vocabularies and dialects. English was used for education and business instead of Latin or French. At first, it was written differently in different regions, depending on the dialect of the speakers. Later, especially after William CAXTON started England's first printing business in 1476, spelling and grammar became more standard. It had essentially become Modern English, and since then, the language has changed far more slowly.

Early Middle English

Between 1066 and 1350, works in Middle English included both popular literature, such as chronicles and songs, and religious educational materials. Such works were aimed mainly at two groups—educated common people and nobles with an English background.

The first Middle English chronicle was Layamon's Brut (1189). A poem of more than 16,000 lines, it begins with the founding of Britain and ends with the Anglo-Saxons driving the Britons into WALES. Almost one-third of the poem tells the story of King Arthur. Although the work did not contribute significantly to the development of ARTHURIAN LITERATURE, Brut ranks as one of the most important works of English literature before Chaucer.

Many of the songs from the early Middle English period are included in sermon collections. The practice of setting religious words to popular tunes to help spread the Christian message began with the FRANCISCANS in Italy. After they came to England in 1224, they composed popular gospel songs in English. The songs were not alliterative in style but used rhyme.

There were also rhyming Middle English poems with moral messages, including debate poems. The Owl and the Nightingale (ca. 1200) is a debate between [secular*](#) and monastic life and between art and philosophy. In The Thrush and the Nightingale (ca. 1275), the Nightingale argues that women are always true and gracious, while the Thrush contends that women are not to be trusted.

Notable works from the early 1300s include Cursor Mundi (ca. 1300), an encyclopedic collection of Bible stories from the Creation to the Day of Judgment, and Handlyng Synne (ca. 1303) by Robert Mannyng of Brunne, a manual of religious stories adapted from the French. Later in his career, Mannyng wrote a chronicle called Rimed Story of England (1338), which begins with Noah and ends with the death of King EDWARD I in 1307.

Much devotional writing in Middle English during this period—sermons, homilies, manuals, allegories, treatises, lives of saints, and adaptations of works written in Latin—was intended for members of the English-speaking nobility, many of them women. An outstanding example is Ancrene Riwle (Rule of the [Anchoresses*](#)), written about 1220. It was a manual for the guidance of three noble Englishwomen in the western part of England who had retreated from the world to live as recluses. Its eight chapters cover Devotions, Custody of the Senses, Regulation of Inward Feelings, Temptations, Confession, Penance, Love, and External Rules. The work is written in a lively, witty style and shows great psychological insight and knowledge of the writings of the leading [mystics*](#) and [theologians*](#).

Another writer, Richard Rolle (died 1349), wrote similar works for three different women who sought to lead a mystical life. He shows a very personal and almost poetic style as he writes about spiritual ecstasy. Later, women writers authored two important Middle English devotional works. In Revelations of Divine Love, JULIAN OF NORWICH meditates on the meaning of the 16 mystical visions of Christ's suffering she had during a severe illness in 1373. The other work, from the early 1400s, is the Book of Margery Kempe, a candid autobiography by a mother of 14 children about her personal and spiritual struggles.

Golden Age

The late 1300s were the first golden age of English literature. At the urging of John WYCLIF, the Bible was translated into Middle English and, together with his sermons, was popularized throughout England. Though the church did not approve of this action, it gave new dignity to the vernacular language. At the same time, important literary writers in London began to produce significant works in the maturing language.

Remember

Words in small capital letters have separate entries, and the index at the end of Volume 4 will guide you to more information on many topics.

An important prose writer, John MANDEVILLE, wrote a very popular book pulling together descriptions of travels throughout the medieval world. It is not clear that he himself traveled at all, but his book captured the imaginations of readers then and later. His work can be considered a part of the history of the English novel. The book was written in Norman French about 1356, then was translated into Middle English many times.

A famous Middle English poet of this period was John GOWER. In fact, he wrote in three languages, with important poems in Norman French and in Latin as well. However, his most popular poem was *The Lover's Confession*, which weaves many stories into a frame built around the Seven Deadly Sins.

Although a number of other authors and their works made the period a rich one, Geoffrey CHAUCER was its leading figure. Chaucer was the son of a London merchant who went on to a varied career as a soldier and diplomat. He authored many works, including one of the great love poems in the English language, *Troilus and Criseyde*. However, Chaucer's masterpiece was his *Canterbury Tales*, which he worked on for 14 years before his death in 1400.

Both Chaucer and Gower wrote rhyming verse. During the late 1300s, there was also a revival of alliterative poetry. The most important poem of this revival was William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. The poem moves from political to spiritual allegory in a series of dream visions of a "field full of folk" that represents society. Its informal alliterative patterns and rhythms give it a personal and meditative flavor.

Another impressive poem of the alliterative revival is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The poem tells about the chivalric adventures of Gawain and contains rich descriptions of clothing, furniture, architecture, the seasons, hunting, and Gawain and the other characters. Other alliterative poems of the period include *Pearl*, a poem that begins with the death of the infant daughter of the poet-dreamer and moves on to an exploration of such religious topics as baptism, divine grace, and heaven. *Patience* and *Purity* are homilies in verse that use unrhymed alliterative lines and employ Bible stories to teach the virtues of humility and obedience. Although the alliterative revival died out in England after 1425, it continued in Scotland in the work of William Dunbar and other Scottish poets to the end of the 1400s.

The two leading English literary figures of the 1400s were Sir Thomas MALORY and William Caxton. Malory was the author of the *Book of King Arthur and His Knights*, an acknowledged

prose masterpiece and the last major work of the Middle Ages to take CHIVALRY seriously. Caxton was the first to print books in English. After learning printing in COLOGNE in Germany, he returned to England and printed about 100 books in English, 24 of which were his own translations of Latin and French works. They also included the works of Chaucer, Gower, and Malory. For some of the books he printed, he wrote prologues and epilogues. Caxton played a leading role in moving English literature from church and court circles out to the wider audience of middle-class English readers. By printing large numbers of books, he encouraged standardization of the spelling and of the language, thereby paving the way for Modern English. (See also [Allegory](#) ; [Ballads](#) ; [Beowulf](#) ; [Drama](#) ; [Kempe, Margery](#) ; [Mysticism](#) .)

Definitions

- * alliteration poetic technique consisting of several words that begin with the same sound
- * rood early word for cross
- * scribe person who hand-copies manuscripts to preserve them
- * dialect form of speech characteristic of a region that differs from the standard language in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar
- * secular nonreligious; connected with everyday life
- * anchoress female hermit
- * mystic person who experiences divine truths through faith, spiritual insight, and intuition
- * theologian person who studies religious

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Source Citation:

"English Language and Literature." *The Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia for Students*. Ed. William Chester Jordan. Vol. 2. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1996. 59-63. *Gale World History In Context*. Web. 6 Jan. 2011.

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Gale Document Number: GALE|CX2897600219