II. **The Middle English Period (1066-1500)**

1. **General Background**

   The Duke of Normandy's victory over King Harold in 1066 meant radical and painful changes for Anglo-Saxon culture and customs. The new masters, the Normans, were descendants of the Vikings but spoke Norman-French. They did not trouble to learn the language of their subjects. Therefore, until the fourteenth century, three languages (and many dialects) were spoken in England: French among the nobility and at court, Latin among the learned clergy, and English among the ordinary people (nine tenths of the population). The mixed character of the English language as spoken today, with its Latin and Germanic bases, goes back to this period when the better sort of people called the meats on their table "beef, veal, pork, and mutton" (from the French bœuf, veau, porc, mouton); the meats came from farms where the respective animals were called ox, calf, swine/pig, and sheep.

   The Normans not only forced their French language upon the English but also introduced the feudal system and martial rule. In literature, they brought new models and subjects from France and changed the Anglo-Saxon system of versification (the end-rhyme became the poetic standard). While the Old English language gradually discarded most of the flexional endings, Norman-French added new lexical and grammatical elements to what became Middle English, the language of the great poet Chaucer.

   The kingdoms of England and Normandy, ruled by William and his successors, including the Plantagenets (1154-1485), became a powerful force in Europe. In 1205 England lost Normandy, and a new nation began to take shape in England. Toward 1400 a language had developed that was neither Norman-French nor Anglo-Saxon. English, the language of the people, had absorbed French vocabulary and grammatical rules. It became the official language of the country, now spoken in schools and courts of law.

   There were also a number of historical and political events with far-reaching consequences. The crusades began in 1096 and exposed Christian Europe to Arab culture. The Magna Carta of 1215 established that taxes had to be levied with the consent of the barons, not by the King alone, and that nobody could be detained illegally. It was a first step towards representative government. Under the Plantagenets, the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) saw the English monarchy fighting for, and eventually losing, its French possessions. The Wars of the Roses (1455-1485) locked the House of York (the white rose) and the House of

---


2 Under King John Lackland, the English barons were granted the liberties of England. The new Magna Carta or Great Charter (1215) was revised several times. It introduced the idea of law as something that is above the King's power, and it protected and guaranteed the freedom of the English Church and the feudal rights of the barons. Although the mass of the people were not very much concerned, this charter was a first step towards individual liberty.
Lancaster (the red rose) in a fierce and bloody civil war. It was ended by the marriage of Henry VII, which united the feuding families and founded the Tudor⁶ line.

For readers and writers, and for literature generally, the establishment in 1476 of Caxton's printing press brought a revolution heralding the beginning of the modern period. A much favoured form of literature was the romance, consisting of tales of heroic knights who sought adventures and battles in order to prove their courage to, and love for, the ladies of the courts. Many of these romances were translations from the French. It was Chaucer who broke with this tradition, and his marvellous *Canterbury Tales* remains the outstanding work in the literature of the Middle English period.

Several illuminated manuscripts of Chaucer's works and of other Middle English texts reflect the close connection in this period not only between art and religion but also between image and text. Artistic subjects are mostly inspired by biblical episodes. One of the fascinating aspects of illuminated manuscripts is the fact that on every page the decoration, the visual element, seems to be as important as the text. Even the text itself, since it is handwritten, has an artistic dimension, as letters grow into plants and as the borders of the pages contain elements that complement and contradict the message of the text. Similarly, many of the first books printed after Caxton's invention contained illustrations (woodcuts and prints). Writers of later periods – such as William Blake and the Pre-Raphaelite poets – returned to this combination of text and image in what could be termed iconotexts.

### 2. Latin and French Literature in England

In his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c.1136) the monk **Geoffrey of Monmouth** (d. 1155) recorded the legendary stories of the Celts, including those of the illustrious King Arthur and the magician Merlin. The Anglo-Norman priest **Wace** (who is also the author of the *Roman de Rou*, a chronicle history of the duke of Normandy) turned Geoffrey of Monmouth's history into a French poem of 14,000 lines entitled *Geste des Bretons* or *Brut d'Angleterre* (1155), representing King Arthur as a blameless and victorious sovereign sitting with his knights at a round table. Wace also added to this semi-mythical life of Arthur the legend of the Holy Grail. Around 1200 another priest, **Layamon**, translated Wace's *Brut* into English, employing the Old English method of alliterative verse but also rhyme as in the French original. This book became a major source for English poetry, prose and drama.

The French metrical romances (tales of chivalry³ mingled with love stories and magic) were known throughout Europe. Thematically, they deal with the deeds of Charlemagne⁵, Arthur

---

³ The Tudor line ruled from 1485-1603 and included Henry VII, Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I, and Elizabeth I. The term "Tudor" also signifies a style of architecture.

⁴ Chivalry refers to the qualities of courage and honour associated with medieval knights; also the knightly system with its religious, moral, and social codes that demanded the defense of the weak and of the (Catholic) faith.

⁵ Charlemagne (742-814) was King of the Franks of Germany (768-814), and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (800-814). He introduced Frankish political institutions in Saxony, and made Christianity compulsory. He improved the administrative institutions and promoted education, the arts, and commerce. One of the great literary works dealing with his campaigns in Spain is *La Chanson de Roland* (*The Song of Roland*), a medieval French epic describing the annihilation of the rear guard of the Frankish forces at Saragossa.
and his knights, and the Roman and Greek heroes celebrated in the classical epics. The poem with the strongest influence throughout the Middle Ages was the *Roman de la Rose*, an allegorical romance written between 1256-1275 by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun. The almost 22,000 lines of this work abound with personified virtues and vices and analyse love in its various aspects. With its didactic and satirical passages (including many verses against women) and its presentation of the courtly and philosophical discussions of love, the *Roman de la Rose* is the most eminent literary work before Chaucer, who translated a part of it into Middle English.

3. Literature in English

The first truly English literature emerged in the fourteenth century when an English language, Middle English, had developed. Religious literature from this period is best represented by William Langland's (c. 1330-86) *Piers Plowman*, written and revised between 1370-1390. It is an allegorical poem which, like the *Roman de la Rose*, is told in the form of a dream. Composed in alliterative and unrhymed verse, *Piers Plowman* records much of the indignation the common people felt at the many abuses in Church and State. John Wyclif (1324-84), a scholar and reformer, tried to abolish some of the bad conditions by training a group of unselfish priests and by translating the Bible.

In addition to the popular adaptations of French romances, of which Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is the finest example, literary genres that prospered were tales, such as those of Gamelyn, the young knight cheated out of his property but regaining it with the help of outlaws, and ballads, such as those about Robin Hood, the kind-hearted outlaw of Sherwood Forest. There was also travel writing, one of the most curious examples being The Travels of Sir John Mandeville. After its first appearance in French around 1356-57, English translations were made (one, from Lincolnshire, is dated c. 1375). Attributed to Sir John Mandeville (c. 1322-72), the book claims to be an account of the author's journeys in the East that was to serve pilgrims to the Holy Land as a geographical and ethical guide. Laced with many fictional passages and drawing on medieval monastic literature, the compilation also takes the reader to Turkey, Tartary, Persia, Egypt, and India. The prototype of the fabulous travel book, it had an important influence on later English writers from Chaucer to Shakespeare. The best known example of another popular genre, didactic poetry, can be found in the verses of John Gower (1325-1408), in Latin, French and English.

But no poet writing in the English tongue in the fourteenth century could surpass the work of Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340-1400), the son of a London wine merchant. He had an interesting career that included positions at court in the service of King Edward III. As a soldier under this king he was taken prisoner in France. Later, Chaucer travelled abroad on many occasions on diplomatic missions and may have met Boccaccio and Petrarch on a journey.

---

6  Giovanni Boccacio (1313-1375), an Italian poet and humanist who is best known for his collection of stories or "novellas" entitled *Decamerone*, first printed in 1470 and written between 1348-53. This work, which is concerned with the morality of love, exerted a great influence on European literature.

7  Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca, 1304-74) was an Italian writer and humanist whose poetry, especially the sonnets, established the motifs and similes for many poets in several European coun-
to Italy in 1372-73. He also worked as a customs official for the port of London, and his last official position was deputy forester in the King's forest in Somerset. He was buried in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey. Chaucer was initially very interested in French poetry. He translated a third of the Roman de la Rose (The Romaunt of the Rose) and wrote The Book of the Duchesse (c. 1370), a dream poem on love in the French tradition. Thereafter he was for some time attracted to Italian literature, the most important of his Italian-influenced works being Troilus and Criseyde (c. 1385), a love story set during the Trojan War and for which Chaucer was inspired by Boccaccio. Shakespeare also treated the subject in a play bearing the same title. During the last period of his poetic career Chaucer turned to English themes, and in 1386 he began The Canterbury Tales which he left unfinished at his death. It is in this work above all that he proves a masterful poet, a shrewd observer, a kind-hearted satirist and an excellent painter of characters and customs. The following lines from the opening Prologue (in which the major characters are introduced), given in Middle English and a modern translation by R. M. Lumiansky, refer to April, a new season and the renewal of life. A number of modern writers have alluded satirically to this important section in their own works (see, for instance, T S. Eliot's reference in The Waste Land, 1922, and David Lodge's opening in his novel Small World, 1984).

Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne,
And smale fowles maken melodye,
That slepen al the night with open yë,
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages):
Than longen folk to go on on pilgrimages
…

When April with its gentle showers has pierced the March drought to the root and bathed every plant in the moisture which will hasten the flowering; when Zephyrus with his sweet breath has stirred the new shoots in every wood and field, and the young sun has run its half-course in the Ram, and small birds sing melodiously, so touched in their hearts by Nature that they sleep all night with open eyes – then folks long to go on pilgrimages …

tries until the end of the seventeenth century. Petrarchism is a special kind of love poetry in which comparisons are made between the beloved (woman) and beautiful things.
The Canterbury Tales is a collection of stories told by pilgrims who have met at a hostelry in Southwark. In order to pass the time as they travel from this part of London to the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket at Canterbury and back, the accompanying host convinces them to tell four stories each, two on the way and two on the return trip. But the work is incomplete: instead of 29 tales (by the 29 pilgrims), there are only 24 stories told altogether.

In the "Prologue" Chaucer introduces the pilgrims in gentle humorous descriptions. Their tales cover a wide field of subjects, from the Knight's romantic story of chivalry to the Monk's complaint about the evils of the time, from satirical tales about marriage to downright erotic adventures told by the Miller and the Reeve. The stories are linked by narrative exchanges between the pilgrims and by prologues and epilogues.

The major part of the work is written in rhyming couplets of various metres. It shows Chaucer at his best as a gifted versifier and a humorous satirist who provides a vivid and sympathetic picture of medieval clerical and lay society.

The fifteenth century did not produce a poet of Chaucer's stature. But it would be misleading to label it a barren age for literature. Although poets such as Thomas Hoccleve (or Ocelle, c. 1369-1426), John Lydgate (c. 1370-1449) and John Skelton (c. 1460-1529) did not go beyond the imitation of Chaucer, popular poetry (songs and short verse) flourished, especially the Scottish ballad. Poems worth remembering are William Dunbar's (c. 1456-1513) The Thistle and the Rose, a political allegory in rhyme royal, and John Barbour's (1320-95) The Bruce, a verse chronicle of the deeds of Bruce, a Scottish king, and his follower James Douglas.

One of the first prose works William Caxton (1422-91) printed after establishing a printing press at Westminster was Sir Thomas Malory's (d. 1471) Morte d'Arthur (1485), a long cycle of Arthurian legends divided into 21 books. It is a free translation in prose from the French and from other sources and records the major romances of chivalry of the Middle Ages: those of King Arthur, the adventures of the Knights of the Round Table, and the legend of the Holy Grail. The collection is one of the most important prose works in English written and published before the sixteenth century.

---

Les Très Riches Heures de Jean Duc de Berry: August. Illuminated by the Limburg brothers

---

8 Thomas à Becket (1118-1170) was Chancellor of Henry II and later Archbishop of Canterbury. In his clerical office, he was forced to oppose the king and tried to defend the rights of the Church. Becket was exiled to France. When he returned to England, Henry had him assassinated in the cathedral at Canterbury. Becket was canonized in 1173, and his shrine at Canterbury became famous as a place where miracles were performed. The story of Saint Thomas à Becket has been the subject of plays by Tennyson and T. S. Eliot.
Some decisive developments also took place in drama during this time. Between 1200-1400 the medieval church plays, brief scenes based on the Bible and the lives of the saints, were acted by the clergy in the church buildings. Gradually, the plays were secularized, a process that is mirrored in the removal of the theatrical scenes from the church to the streets. In the fourteenth century these Miracle and Mystery Plays, as they were called, also introduced comic characters. They were rivalled by the very popular Morality Plays, in which the characters are allegorical figures representing vices and virtues. *Everyman* (c. 1509-19), which is still performed each year at Salzburg, Austria, is the best-known example in this genre of didactic drama. The play shows how Everyman, called by Death, is forsaken by all his former companions and is left alone with his Good Deeds that ensure his going to heaven. In addition to the originally religious church plays (Miracles and Mysteries) and the Moralities, there were Interludes, i.e. short and humorous scenes or dramatic dialogues often performed in the houses of the better educated gentry. The characters in these plays were mostly drawn from real life and enjoyed a great popularity.