

The Medieval Period

British Literature



The Norman Conquest

- In 1066 A.D., the English King Edward the Confessor died and the Witan declared Harold II king.
- However, William, Duke of Normandy, claimed the kingship and invaded England, defeating Harold at the Battle of Hastings.

Norman Conquest

- In the four years that followed, the Normans killed most of the native English nobility, subjugated the rest of the populace, and divided the country into estates or fiefdoms, ruled by French-speaking barons loyal to William the Conqueror.

Norman Conquest

- The Norman Conquest brought an end to the Anglo-Saxon era and ushered in the Medieval Period.



Anglo-Norman Literature

- The Norman Conquest shattered English literature.
- For 200 years, English became a lower-class language spoken by the poor and powerless.
- Norman French was the language of the court and noble classes.

Anglo-Norman Literature

- The production of literature written in English came to a near standstill.
- Some monks continued to produce works in English and the illiterate continued to compose oral songs, but very little of this survives today.
- Most of the non-Latin literature written was written in Norman French, called Anglo-Norman Literature.

Anglo-Norman Lit

- The literature tends to be practical, keeping with the character of the Norman people.
- However, the French did import some literature containing romances and fabliaux. They also wrote lals, or songs.

Anglo-Norman Lit

- One important innovation introduced by the Normans was poetry written in rhymed stanzas.

- From the time of the Conquest to 1202, Normandy remained part of England. After England lost Normandy, the French influence declined.
- By the middle of the century, the upper classes began to adopt the native language again, and English became the primary language of both the upper and lower classes.

Organization of Medieval Society

- William the Conqueror brought feudalism to England.
- Feudalism—the system by which Europe was ruled in the Middle Ages. All land and all people ultimately belonged to the king, who granted large tracts of land to members of the nobility, known as barons.

Medieval Organization

- The barons were bound to be loyal to the king, to raise armies to fight in his battles, and to pay taxes to support his court.
- In turn, the barons granted land to lesser nobles and required service and support from them.
- At the very bottom were bondsmen, known as peasants, villeins, or serfs who lived and worked on the nobles' land.

Organization

- The life of a serf was pretty miserable.
- They were property of their feudal lords and could not leave the land or even marry without permission.
- They lived on meager diets, suffered terribly from disease, and worked very hard only to turn over much of what they produced to the lord's household.

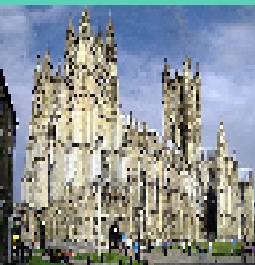
Organization

- Occasionally, a serf could earn freedom by some exceptional service to the lord's family.
- Gradually, throughout the Medieval Period, a class of freemen developed that included merchants, traders, laborers, and artisans.

Organization

- In a feudal society, each person is bound by a system of loyalties known as a vassalage. So, a serf might be a vassal to a knight and the knight might be a vassal to a duke and the duke might be a vassal to an earl and the earl might be a vassal to the king. The king was considered a vassal to the Pope, the head of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Influence of the Church



- At no time in history has the church been more influential than in the Medieval Period.
- Throughout this time period, the Roman Catholic Church, centered in Rome, had tremendous wealth and power. Considerable resources went in to building towering cathedrals.

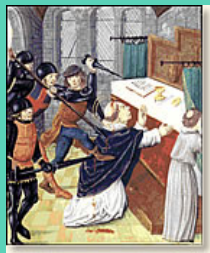
Influence of the Church

- The head of the Catholic Church was the Pope, and below him was a variety of officials (cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests).
- Many clerics served as government officials, and the Church and government often collaborated.



Influence of the Church

- England can be considered a "house with two masters" and political leaders often quarreled with the clergy.
- Such a quarrel led to the murder of Thomas Beckett, the Archbishop of Canterbury, by barons loyal to Henry II.



Influence of the Church

- Much of Medieval literature deals with religious subjects and themes.
- Surviving works included the retelling of Biblical stories, biographies of saints, collections of sermons, tracts on the seven deadly sins and the seven cardinal virtues, and so on.

Common Themes

- *Memento mori*—"reminder of death"—death comes soon and without warning so be prepared
- *Contemptu mundi*—"contempt for the world"—dislike for worldly values

The Crusades

- From the 11th to 13th c., the church sponsored a series of Crusades, or holy wars, to recapture Jerusalem from the Moslems.
- This influenced literature by introducing the Persian idea of the idealized woman, typically the Virgin Mary.



Geoffrey Chaucer

- The devout people of the Medieval Period often went on journeys or pilgrimages to visit holy sites.
- *The Canterbury Tales*, written by Chaucer, describes a group of people taking such a journey to Canterbury, England.

Romance Literature, Chivalry, and Courtly Love

- The Crusades and devotion to the Virgin Mary influenced the development of a unique literature known as a romance.
- A romance portrays the standards of knightly conduct known as chivalry.
- Even though Medieval romances may have dealt with love, they were stories of adventure.

Romances

- Romances told the stories of knights—their battles, crusades, and tournaments—and, incidentally, the love that inspired these actions.

Characteristics of a Romance

- Trial—a series of loosely connected adventures that test the knight's virtues (loyalty, honesty, gentleness, faith, courtesy, skill, and courage). The trial may take the form of a quest, a journey to some far off place to do some mighty deed. (like the quest for the Holy Grail)
- Fair lady—often the trial was undertaken to rescue a fair lady (idealization of women)

Courtly Love

- Courtly love was the code of behavior between women and their suitors.



King Arthur

- The most famous English romance is the tale of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table.



Ballads

- Ballads were songs of the common people.
- Characteristics:
 - 4 line stanza
 - Simple narrative
 - Served as entertainment and recorded events that captured the popular imagination

Medieval Drama

- Medieval dramas were initially performed by the Church and told Bible stories or stories of the saints' lives.
- Gradually, these moved out of the churches and were performed in courtyards of inns.

Medieval Drama

- Three types of plays:
 - Mystery plays: told stories from the Bible
 - Miracle plays: told stories of the saints
 - Morality plays: represented abstract virtues and vices as characters

Political Developments

- Politically, the Medieval Period in England was one of enormous change.
- The feudal system was solidified.
- Henry II introduced a system of traveling judges whose rulings were to make up the common law that still provides the basis for the legal system of England and the United States

Political Developments

- Legislative government, called Parliament, was created.
- After the death of Henry II, his son John taxed the barons so much and made so many enemies that he was forced to sign the Magna Carta, or “great charter,” which limited the rights of the king, made him subject to the rulings of Parliament, and guaranteed a trial by a jury of one’s peers.

Political

- From 1339 to 1453, England fought the Hundred Years’ War over possession of French lands
- The English won because of the introduction of the longbow to warfare.
- In 1381, the Peasants’ Revolt, led by Jack Straw and Wat Tyler, saw peasants fighting for individual liberty and human rights.

Social and Cultural Changes

- Promotion of learning—Oxford and Cambridge Universities were founded
- Towns and cities grew around textile mills.
- Merchants and artists organized themselves into guilds responsible for training apprentices and regulating business.
- A middle class emerged.

Black Death

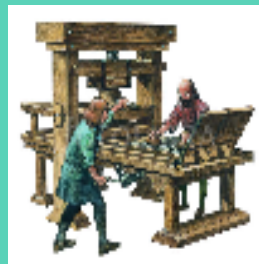
- In the mid-1300s, the bubonic plague, or Black Death, devastated England, killing 1/3 of its inhabitants.



John Wycliffe

- John Wycliffe, a religious reformer, finished the first complete translation of the Bible into English.
- For the first time, ordinary people could read and interpret the text on their own.
- This set the stage for the Protestant Reformation.

Printing



- William Caxton introduced printing from movable type to England.
- For the first time, books were easily made in large quantities, thus spreading learning.
- This helped cause the decline of the aristocracy.

The End

- From 1455-1485, England was torn by civil war between two noble houses. The House of Lancaster (red rose) fought the House of York (white rose) for the throne in what was known as the War of the Roses.
- Richard III (Lancaster) was defeated by Henry Tudor (York) and became King Henry VII.