

History of  
English Literature  
(1<sup>st</sup> part, down to 1603)

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Note : We strongly recommend that students ask themselves and their tutors questions on whatever is unclear, that they compare the information provided here with other reference books to be found in the library, and that they use other on-line resources, for instance *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*, <http://www.bartleby.com/cambridge/> ; also useful for historical references, the BBC website, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/> , with a clear timeline..

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## PROLOGUE

The British Islands have long been the last areas of land reached by people migrating west from continental Europe. The first hunter-gatherers who settled there some 100 centuries (or 400 generations) before the beginning of recorded history hardly left anything for us to determine who they may have been. Over this long span of time many small-scale societies must have developed, merged, split and disappeared.

The Neolithic (or New Stone Age) inhabitants of the islands may have come from the Iberian (Spanish) peninsula or even the North African coast. The first stage in the building of Stonehenge can be traced to them. After 2400 BC new groups of people arrived from Europe. They were round-headed and strongly built, taller than Neolithic Britons. It is not known whether they invaded by armed force, were invited over because of their military and metal-working skills, or just wandered in and settled. Their arrival is marked by the first individual graves, furnished with pottery beakers, from which these people get their name. The Beaker people probably spoke an Indo-European language. They also brought skills to make bronze tools and these began to replace stone ones. But they took over many of the old ways, the stone circles or 'henges' in particular, with Stonehenge as something of a cultural and possibly political centre until 1300 BC.

While there is extensive archaeological evidence about when and where sandstones and bluestones were erected (see websites on Stonehenge) the purpose and function of these earth and stone circles are still unknown, and probably changed over the centuries. The Beaker people's richest graves are to be found in such circles. They can be seen in many places, as far as the Orkney Islands north of Scotland, and as far south as Cornwall.

However, from about 1300 BC onwards, the henge civilization seems to have become less important, and was overtaken by a new form of society in southern England, that of a settled farming class. At first this farming society developed in order to feed the people at the henges, but eventually it became more important and powerful as it grew richer, as is testified by family villages and fortified enclosures.

Around 700 BC the country was invaded by Celtic tribes that had crossed over from central Europe in search of empty lands for settlement. Our knowledge of the Celts is limited, but we know that their technology included the use of iron, which made it possible for them to farm heavy soils. The fact that they lived in towns or 'hill-forts'

suggests that they were highly successful farmers, capable of growing enough food for a large population. The Celtic tribes were ruled over by a warrior class, of which the priests, or Druids, seem to have been particularly important members. These Druids were apparently not interested in developing writing and reading skills; they memorised all the religious teachings, tribal laws, history, medicine, and other knowledge necessary in Celtic society. Druids from different tribes all over Britain probably met once a year. They had no temples, but they met in sacred groves of trees, on certain hills, by rivers or by river sources. We know little of their kind of worship except that it emphasised the connection between man and nature (this would at times involve ritual sacrifices).

During the Celtic period women may have had a certain degree of independence, certainly more than they were to experience for several hundreds of years afterwards. When the Romans invaded Britain two of the largest tribes were ruled by women who fought from their chariots. The most powerful Celt to stand up to the Romans was a woman, Boudica. She had become queen of her tribe after her husband had died. In 61 AD she led her tribe against the Romans, nearly drove them from Britain, and destroyed London, the Roman capital, before she was defeated and killed. Roman writers commented on the courage and strength of women in battle, which definitely suggests a measure of equality between the sexes among the richer Celts.

Julius Caesar first came to Britain in 55 BC, but it was not until almost a century later, in 43 AD, that a Roman army actually occupied Britain.<sup>1</sup> Originally, the Romans had invaded the island because the Celts of Britain were working with the Celts of Gaul against them. The British Celts were giving food to their European counterparts, and were allowing them to hide in Britain. The Romans decided to reverse this logic, and to make use of British food for their own army fighting the Gauls.

The Romans brought the skills of reading and writing to Britain, and eventually they christianised the Celts. They established a Romano-British culture across the southern half of Britain, as far north as the River Humber and as far west as the River Severn. This part of Britain was inside the empire. Beyond were upland areas that Rome could barely control. These areas were kept an eye on from the towns of York, of Chester, and of Caerleon in the western peninsula of Britain that later became known as Wales. The Romans could not conquer 'Caledonia', as they called Scotland, although they spent over a century trying to do so. They eventually built a strong wall along the northern

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<sup>1</sup> The name 'Britain' comes from the word 'Pretani', the Celtic word by which the inhabitants of the islands referred to themselves. The Romans mispronounced the word and called the island 'Britannia'.

border, named after the emperor Hadrian, who had planned it. At the time, Hadrian's wall was intended to keep out raiders from the north.

Roman control of Britain came to an end as the empire began to collapse. The first signs were the attacks by Celts of Caledonia in 367 AD. The Roman legions found it more and more difficult to stop the raiders from crossing Hadrian's wall. The same was happening on the European mainland as Germanic groups, Saxons and Franks, began to raid the coast of Gaul. In 409 AD Rome pulled its last soldiers out of Britain and the Romano-British were left to fight alone against the Scots and the Irish, and against the Saxon raiders crossing from Germany. The latter gradually triumphed over the defenceless Romanised Celts in the course of the 5th century. The survivors among these Christian Celts were thus pushed westwards into Cornwall, the mountains of Wales, northwards to Scotland, and across the sea to Ireland. (A legendary Celtic king who fought against the Germanic tribes is King Arthur, who is still well-known to us through the legends of the Round Table.)

The long history of invasions – or migrations – had not come to an end. Later, in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries Vikings would come and raid and settle; in the 11<sup>th</sup> century the political and cultural history of the island took a radical turn with the Norman invasion; and the 20<sup>th</sup> century would see another kind of migration: the massive arrival of people from former British colonies, mainly the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent.

The people who had lived in Britain before the Germanic invasions obviously had a developed culture, which included tale telling and poetry. However, until the introduction of christianity and the industrious writing down to which monks were committed we hardly have any trace of them because they only existed orally. There is a rich Celtic literature, developed both in Wales and in Ireland, but the present course focuses on English literature, which begins with the settling of Angles, Saxons and Jutes.

(See [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/british\\_prehistory/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/british_prehistory/) ,  
<http://www.distinguishedwomen.com/biographies/boudicca.html> )

# THE OLD ENGLISH PERIOD

## 1. Historical background

Two important events affected the island of Britain in the Old English period (also called the Anglo-Saxon period).

1) *The Anglo-Saxon invasions*. The Anglo-Saxon invaders came to Britain in the latter part of the 5th century, after the Romans had left the country unprotected. Actually the invaders came from three powerful Germanic tribes, the Saxons, the Angles, and the Jutes. The Jutes settled mainly in Kent and along the south coast. The Angles settled in the east, and also in the north Midlands, while the Saxons settled between the Angles and the Jutes in a band of land from the Thames estuary westwards. The Anglo-Saxon migrations gave the larger part of Britain its name,<sup>2</sup> its language, and its links with *Germania* (i.e., the great body of Teutonic tribes whose migrations disrupted the Roman Empire).

To the Romans, these people were barbarians who appeared out of nowhere and endangered the political structure of the Empire as well as its recently acquired Christian ideology: these Germanic tribes were ‘pagans’,<sup>3</sup> their ways of thinking were alien to the Romans.

2) *Re-introduction of christianity*. The second main event of the period is the conversion of these tribes — who had by then settled in England — to Christianity. In 597 Pope Gregory the Great sent a monk called Augustine<sup>4</sup> from Rome in order to (re)establish Christianity in England.<sup>5</sup> He began by converting the Jutes (who had established themselves in the south-east), because the king’s wife came from Europe and was already Christian. Augustine became the first archbishop of Canterbury (the capital of the Jutes) in 601. Several ruling families in England accepted Christianity. But Augustine and his group of monks made little progress with ordinary people. This was

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<sup>2</sup> The word ‘England’ means ‘the land of the Angles’.

<sup>3</sup> Derived from the Latin word for village ‘paganus’, the word is used to refer to people who are not Christians.

<sup>4</sup> Not to be confused with the other, more famous, Augustine (354-430), bishop of Hippo in North Africa.

<sup>5</sup> Several Roman-British kingdoms had become Christian before the Germanic people came to settle: the new religion had been officially recognised by Emperor Constantine in 313 and it comforted its immediate appeal by merging with local traditions.

partly because Augustine was interested in establishing Christian *authority*, and that meant bringing rulers to the new faith.

It was the Celtic Christian Church which brought Christianity to the ordinary people of Britain. While the bishops from the Roman Church lived at the courts of the kings, which they made centres of Church power across England, the Celtic missionaries went out from their monasteries of Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, walking from village to village teaching Christianity. The two Christian traditions disagreed on such matters as vestment and tonsure, ways of deciding on liturgical dates such as Easter, but also on a much more fundamental issue: the Celtic brand of Christianity was Pelagian (after the name of the Breton monk Pelagius, which means 'he of the sea', end of the 4<sup>th</sup> beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century), i.e. it did not subscribe to the notion of the original sin, introduced first by Paul and later defined by the African Augustine. We are born free of sin and can achieve grace by our free will, away from the trappings of the Church. In 663 at the Synod (meeting) of Whitby the king of Northumbria decided in favour of the Roman approach, partly out of concern for easier contact with the rest of the (Western) Christian world but also to comfort the institutional power of the prelates. The Celtic Church was declared heretical, and its influence retreated as Rome extended its authority over all Christians, even in Celtic parts of the island.

Although the Anglo-Saxons formed the bedrock, or the foundations, of English culture, they themselves underwent, and benefited from, many foreign influences in the course of time (there is never such a thing as a 'pure' race or a 'pure' culture — such a thing is always a myth, and usually a dangerous one). At the end of the 8th century and in the 9th century, the Anglo-Saxons in their turn had to face the invasions of the Vikings<sup>6</sup> coming from Norway and Denmark. The king of Wessex, Alfred the Great (848-899), established himself as a figure of resistance against the Danes, unified the little kingdoms of the south of England against the common enemy, and finally defeated the Danes in 878. He christianised them and allowed them to settle in eastern and central England where they gradually mixed with the local population.

The Danish invasions started anew in the 10th and early 11th centuries. One of their leaders (who was king of Sweden and also became king of Norway) even became king of England: Canute (or Cnut). He reigned until 1035. Canute worked hard to unite his Danish and Saxon peoples. He also developed trading links with the continent. When he

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<sup>6</sup> A word which refers to “the practice of marauding or piracy” (OED).



died, the Witan<sup>7</sup> chose Edward, the son of the Saxon king Ethelred, as his successor. Edward had been brought up in an abbey and was called Edward the Confessor, because he was more interested in the Church than in kingship. Under his reign the Saxon lords were unable to prevent the spread of Norman influence and power, because Edward had spent most of his life in Normandy, his mother (Ethelred's wife) being a daughter of the Duke of Normandy.<sup>8</sup> Yet on his death-bed, in 1066, Edward chose Harold of Wessex, a Saxon baron, to be king in his place; but, predictably enough, the throne was claimed by the kings of Norway and Denmark because of their family ties with Canute, and by Duke William of Normandy, more or less for the same reasons — he was Edward's cousin. Harold managed to defeat an invading army from Norway, but a few days later he had to face another invasion by Duke William, who landed on the Sussex coast and defeated the Saxons at Hastings in 1066. On Christmas Day, 1066, William the Norman, now known as William the Conqueror, was crowned king of England (in Edward's new church of Westminster Abbey).

As in much of western Europe at the time, two ways of life and thought gradually merged, namely the Germanic and the Christian traditions. The Anglo-Saxons had their own (non-Christian) religion,<sup>9</sup> and their way of life and social organisation reflected heroic ideals of bravery, loyalty, and physical courage, which were far removed from the Christian ideal of (qualified) meekness preached by the Roman and Irish missionaries.

Most of the literature of the Anglo-Saxon period is associated with these two main trends of thought: either the stories were brought over by the invading tribes and dealt with their Germanic way of life (often related to life at sea), or they were Christian stories derived from the Bible or from legends about saints.

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<sup>7</sup> An Anglo-Saxon institution akin to a King's Council. The Witan probably grew out of senior warriors and churchmen to whom kings had turned for advice or support on difficult matters. By the tenth century it had become a formal body, issuing laws and charters (though a king could ignore the Witan's advice, however dangerous it might be for him to do so).

<sup>8</sup> As their name suggests, the Normans were people from the north. They were the descendants of Vikings who had captured, and settled in, northern France. They had soon become French in their language and Christian in their religion. But they were still well-known for their fighting skills.

For an idea of the complexity of politics at the time (and to dispel any notion that things were simpler in the past), see <http://www.britannia.com/history/monarchs/mon20.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Christians called them heathens or pagans. They worshipped gods like Wotan (god of war, knowledge and poetry), Thor (god of thunder), or Freija (goddess of love) whose names have survived in the names of days: 'Wednesday', 'Thursday', 'Friday.'

The literature of the Old English period was recorded in manuscripts, the majority of which were lost in wars, fires, or because the monasteries (which were the centres of culture and learning) were destroyed at the time of the Danish invasions. It is written in Old English, which is the English language at an early stage in its development, when it still had inflections.<sup>10</sup> As a language it was not unified — it consisted of various dialects. Note that all illustrations provided in this syllabus are translations into modern English, not the original texts which at this stage in your studies would be utterly incomprehensible.

Old English literature begins with poetry, not with prose. The earlier texts were based on a tradition of oral poetry brought over by the Germanic invaders, and dealing with their life back in *Germania*,<sup>11</sup> or during their migrations over land and on sea. This oral poetry was then written down by clerics<sup>12</sup> in the monasteries of Anglo-Saxon England, i.e., after the beginning of the christianisation of the country in the 7th century.

## 2. Old English poetry

### Secular poetry

#### Heroic poetry

Old English heroic poetry is in fact the nearest we can get to the oral tradition of the heroic age of *Germania*. The technique used in Anglo-Saxon poetry (stressed alliterative verse, see below) is clearly the product of an oral tradition. Poems were recited by gleemen, or jongleurs, that is, 'itinerant medieval entertainers proficient in juggling, acrobatics, music, and recitation' (Merriam-Webster); when particularly skilled and attached to a court, these minstrels were called 'scops.' Most of the time, these poems (that were practically always set to music) were intended for an aristocratic audience. Yet among those early testimonies of Anglo-Saxon literature we also find the following three lines that are a ploughman's greeting to the earth when ploughing his first furrow:

*Hal wes thu, folde, fira modor,*

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<sup>10</sup> An inflection is a change in the form of a word (usually a modification or affixation), signalling changes in such grammatical functions as tense, person, gender, number, or case.

<sup>11</sup> 'Germania' is a word coined to refer to wherever Germanic peoples were roaming; it has nothing to do with Germany.

<sup>12</sup> Members of the clergy.

*Beo thu growende on godes faethme;  
Fodre gefulled firum to nytte.*

Hale be thou Earth, Mother of Men,  
Fruitful be thou in the arms of the god;  
Be filled with thy fruit for the fare-need of man.<sup>13</sup>

Old English verse is alliterative and stressed, with no rhyme. This means that each line contains four stressed syllables and two or three alliterations (repetition of initial consonants), plus a varying number of unstressed syllables. There is a definite pause (caesura) between the two halves of each line, with two stresses on each side of the caesura. For example:

Forth fled the hours: floated on the waves  
The ship cliff-sheltered: shield-bearers ready  
Stood at the stem: the streaming waters  
Brake upon the beach: men bore the treasure  
To the bark's bosom: bright and costly  
With wealth of weapons: on willing journey  
The boat iron-bound was borne to seaward.

(From *Beowulf*, adapted into modern English<sup>14</sup>)

These poems were part of an oral tradition which was written down after the Germanic tribes had settled in England and had been christianised. The passage to writing could only occur after christianisation, since it is in the monasteries that the monks went to the trouble of confining these stories to their manuscripts.

None of those early texts refer to local (British) heroes: they take us to continental Europe or to Scandinavia, as in *Beowulf*.

*Beowulf* (first half of the 8th century)

The greatest Old English poem, *Beowulf*, is a story of over 3,000 lines. It is the only surviving manuscript of this sort: i.e., of a long epic and narrative poem dealing with a traditional Germanic theme and at the same time giving a picture of the culture and society of the heroic age of the Germanic peoples. (On the context, background and various versions, see, among other websites, <http://www.legends.dm.net/beowulf/> )

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<sup>13</sup> The forms 'thou' and 'thee' are personal pronouns in the second person *singular*, now no longer in use except for archaizing effect (compare with German 'Du'); similarly, 'thy' is the possessive adjective and 'thine' the possessive pronoun.

<sup>14</sup> We have not been able to trace who wrote this excellent translation. Please help if you can.

This poem is a good example of the combination of heroic idealism and of the sombre fatalism which seems to have been part of the Germanic temperament. This fatalism results from the hardships of their life, combined with the fact that they did not believe in an afterlife, at least not in the Christian sense. They did believe that heroes killed in battle would go to a place called Walhalla.

The poem consists of two major episodes with many digressions. Beowulf is the nephew of the King of the Geats (who probably lived in what is now southern Sweden). The first part of the poem deals with the visit of Beowulf to the King of Denmark. The king is getting old and has long been plagued by a man-eating monster called Grendel. The monster regularly comes to the king's hall to prey on his warriors. It is to kill this monster that Beowulf comes to Denmark, the idea being that he will thereby prove his bravery in battle and his generous fidelity to the king, and that he will also establish his reputation as a hero.

He fights with Grendel and wounds him mortally. But Grendel's mother comes to take revenge for the death of her son; Beowulf follows her to her underwater den and slays her after a desperate struggle. Beowulf and his companions then leave for home, laden with honours and presents from the Danish king, who is now rid of both monsters.

The second part of the work deals with what happens fifty years later. Beowulf has now long been the king of the Geats, and as an old man he has to defend his people from a fiery dragon ravaging the country. He fights the dragon with his warriors, and though he succeeds in killing it he is himself mortally wounded.

The poem ends with an account of Beowulf's funeral: his body is burned on an elaborate funeral pyre, amid the lamentations of his warriors.

It is worth remembering that, although the poem was written down in England, it speaks of the period of Germanic history *before* the Anglo-Saxons settled in England.

*Beowulf* is a mixture of historical and marvellous (or supernatural) elements. Indeed the poem refers to kings and heroes who are also mentioned in *Widsith* or in early Scandinavian poetry and in the poetry of various Teutonic peoples; but then of course Grendel and his mother and the fiery dragon are not historical figures — they belong to the world of legend and magic.

There are also many digressions and allusions which make it clear that the poet relied on his listeners' knowledge of a whole body of stories concerning other Germanic

heroes. These stories and heroes were thus common to all of Germania: they belonged to the culture of a variety of peoples who shared the same frame of reference. No patriotic feeling is expressed here: Beowulf is a hero in his own right, an example of individual heroic virtue and generosity. So, *Beowulf* is a heroic poem celebrating the exploits of a great warrior, whose character and actions are held up as a model of aristocratic virtue for all.

Incidentally, one might note that an early Germanic heroic poem like *Beowulf* has similarities with the great classical epic poems, such as Homer's *Odyssey* or Virgil's *Aeneid*. As in Homer, we see in *Beowulf*: (1) the great courtesy with which men of rank are received and taken leave of; (2) the generosity of a ruler, who rewards with presents the value and courage of his men; (3) the thirst for fame gained through the achievement of great deeds of courage and endurance; (4) the solemn boasting of warriors before and after the battle — to establish their fame — as well as the interest in genealogies and the pride on a noble heredity: for example, they would say, 'I am the son of so and so, who did this and that...' — which is also a way of cultivating the memory of the dead.

Yet there are also Christian intrusions in this pagan poem, introduced by the clerics who wrote it down in England after the christianisation of the country. However, these intrusions do not weaken the pagan spirit of the poem, for they mention only very general Christian notions (such as God's creation of the world). Thus the civilization evoked in the poem is based on the Germanic ideal of nobility, as defined in terms of loyalty, but also generosity, bravery, physical strength — features which are typical of the heroic age and not of the Christian doctrine (which insists more on devotion to God and humility).

Importantly also, there is in this poem a keen sense of the shortness of life and of the passing away of all things, except for the fame which a man leaves behind and through which he might gain some sort of immortality among the living.

Besides, it is noteworthy that the poem presents an interesting picture of life at the court of a warrior-king, complete with the courtesies, scenes of beer-drinking, the exchange of gifts, and the presence of the poet (the scop) among the warriors, chanting his verse about the deeds of the fighting men and in the process ensuring their fame.

In terms of technique, the poem is written in stressed alliterative lines (with no rhyme). The poet uses an extensive vocabulary, including what is called 'kennings' or 'picture-names' — i.e., poetic metaphors visually describing things and people. The sea thus

becomes 'the swan's road'; the body is 'the bones' house'; a ship might be called 'a sea-goer', 'a sea-wood', or 'a wave-floater'. Consider the following extract:

No mere retainer he, enriched with arms,  
If I may read his face and peerless form.  
Now must I needs your ancient lineage know  
Before you further fare, false traitor spies  
On Danish land. Ye dwellers on far shores,  
Ye ocean-wanderers, hear my open thought;  
I deem it best that ye without delay  
Make clear to me when all your comings are.'  
Then answered him the eldest, opened he,  
Guide of the troop, the treasure of his words.  
'We come from country of the Geat kin,  
And hearth-companions are to Hygelac;  
My father was of fame among our folk,  
A noble chief, his name was Ecgtheow:  
He lingered for long winters ere he left  
The dwelling-places, now grown old in days.  
Wide through the Witan lives his fair renown.  
With hearts of good intent we hither came  
To seek thy lord, the son of Healfdene,  
The guardian of his people; grant us then  
Thy favour, for we bring the famous lord  
Of Danish men a mighty message here,  
And nought shall be kept secret that I know:  
For thou canst tell if what we heard was true,  
That midst the Scylding folk some foe unknown,  
Some hidden doer of the deeds of hate,  
Hath wrought in the dark nights, by nameless fear  
And dangerous intent, defeat and death.'

Only two other texts belong to the same early epic tradition *Finnsburgh* and *Waldhere*, and we only have badly corrupted fragments of them.

The next poems are all to be found in a manuscript known as the *Exeter Ms*.

#### *Widsith (The Far Wanderer)*

The text of *Widsith* must date back to the end of the 7th century or the early 8th century (i.e., after the christianisation of England), but the story existed in its oral form before that. It is partly the autobiographical record of an itinerant scop. The poem reflects a world of wanderings and conquests — the world that in fact collided with and destroyed the Roman empire and was, at the same time, itself absorbed by it (since these 'barbarian' conquerors were christianised after they settled in England).

The scop tells about his travels throughout the Germanic world and mentions many rulers he visited; some of these are also mentioned in other poems, which suggests that these heroic poems were at least partly based on history and incorporated real (i.e., historical) figures.

This poem also helps us to establish that the heroes in this poetry were not regional or national, which is to say that they were admired and praised not only in their own tribe but in the whole of Germania, where they were regarded as examples of heroic virtue. In other words they were admired for their deeds as such, rather than as heroes of their tribes — at this stage there was no nationalistic spirit.

*Deor* (9th or 10th century)

This is a short poem of 42 lines divided into seven unequal sections, expressing the complaint of a scop who after years of service with his lord seems to have fallen out of favour and to have been supplanted by a rival. He consoles himself by narrating the past misfortunes of Germanic heroes, who eventually overcame their difficulties. After each reference to the troubles of a famous character he adds: ‘That grief passed away, so may this sorrow pass’.

This poem is interesting because, beside the usual interest in heroic deeds (this time, those of Wayland the Smith, Theodoric, and Hermanic), it also contains a personal elegiac note (i.e., a note of nostalgia or lament) that is also to be found in the poems discussed below under the title ‘elegiac poetry’, the theme of which is usually the transience of things and the unreliability of the world, sometimes — though not in *Deor* — ending with a Christian consolation.

*Beowulf*, *Widsith* and *Deor* are the only remaining examples of an early Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry dealing with continental heroes and their deeds in Germania. However, towards the end of the Anglo-Saxon period the old heroic note re-appears in one poem, *The Battle of Maldon* (10th century), which deals with contemporary events (in England in the 10th century). The work uses the old epic manner to deal with one of the many clashes between the Anglo-Saxons and the Danes, which culminated in the conquest of the country by Canute in 1012. Thus, it deals with a contemporary event but in the old manner, contrary to what is to be found in *The Battle of Brunanburgh* (937), which was also written in the 10th century but in which a new note of patriotism emerges, so that

the hero is now no longer presented as an example of individual heroic virtue for all, but as the champion of his nation. This shift of emphasis has to do with the work of King Alfred, who had managed to create a national sentiment (an awareness of being English first and foremost) as part of his attempts to resist the Danish invasions.

### Elegiac poetry

The poems considered in this section are 'pagan' Germanic narrative (though not heroic) poems which are not so much celebrations of heroic deeds as melancholy expressions of regret for a lost happy past mixed with a measure of self-pity. (There was already an elegiac note in *Deor*, though this was above all an example of heroic poetry.) In particular, there are two poems which are probably as old as *Beowulf* (8th century) and which are characterized by vague Christian intrusions: both of these poems end on a conventional religious sentiment — again, because they were written down in England after the beginning of the christianisation of the country. These elegiac poems with a Christian addition at the end are *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. Here is an example of a Christian coda: 'Well is it for him who seeks forgiveness, the heavenly father's solace, in whom all our fastness stands'.

*The Wanderer* records the complaint of a solitary man who had once been happy in the service of a loved lord (read as the Lord in a Christian perspective), but who, after his lord's death and the passing away of that time of happiness and friendship, has become a wanderer on the path of exile across the icy sea. Though it is a narrative poem, there is in *The Wanderer* an impressive note of lament for departed joys, with an effective use of the 'ubi sunt' theme ('where are the snows of yesteryear') which was going to become a favourite theme of the Middle Ages.

*The Seafarer* is another narrative poem, which records the monologue of an old sailor who recalls the loneliness and hardships of a life at sea, though also the fascination it exerts on those who live on it.

There are also a number of narrative poems which contain an elegiac note but without any Christian intrusion.

*The Ruin* gives a description of a ruined city and provides a sad picture of desolation, contrasted with the former prosperity of the place. The mood is somberly fatalistic, showing that in Anglo-Saxon poetry the elegiac tone and mood express the



inevitable consequence of the destruction caused by heroism. You could say that the elegiac mood is the counterpart of the heroic mood.

The last two poems illustrating this current of elegiac poetry are both dramatic monologues (a specific kind of poem in which the speaker — the person who says ‘I’ — is not the poet), containing the only traces of love to be found in Anglo-Saxon poetry. However, these poems are not truly lyrical (they are not mostly about the expression of personal feeling for its own sake): they are first and foremost narrative poems, intent on telling a story.

*The Wife's Lament.* This poem focuses on a wife's love and longing for her absent husband; she also curses the enemy who is responsible for her present plight. The circumstances are not very clear, but it seems that her husband has gone away to sea and that she is now forced to dwell in a sort of cave under an oaktree because of the intrigues of her husband's kinsmen (relatives). The poem is also interesting in that it introduces a female perspective as opposed to male heroism.

*The Husband's Message.* This is a poem of 53 lines in which the speaker is the piece of wood on which a message has been carved: it first tells the wife about its own life-story and then goes on to speak the message it carries. The husband reminds his wife of her earlier vows, tells her that he has been driven from her by some enemy, and finally asks her to join him across the sea.

### Riddles

Another kind of secular poetry is to be found in the one hundred Anglo-Saxon riddles (enigmas), which were composed in England by clerics of the 7th and the 8th centuries; some of them are translations from a Latin original. These riddles were a literary amusement of the time, mainly for the aristocracy but presumably also intended for common people. Their chief interest now lies in the fact that they give us glimpses of daily life in Anglo-Saxon England, and of the popular beliefs held at the time. For example:

A life-thief stole my world-strength,  
Ripped off flesh and left me skin,  
Dipped me in water and drew me out,  
Stretched me bare in the tight sun;  
The hard blade, clean steel, cut,  
Scraped-fingers folded, shaped me.  
(Riddle 26, transl. Williamson,  
suggested solution : a hide to be used for a book)

## Gnomic verse

They deal with generalizations about morals and experience, and with the properties of objects encountered in daily life. They are the only group of Anglo-Saxon poems which are not aristocratic in origin.

‘Gnomic’ comes from a Greek word which means ‘to do with opinion, judgement’. Gnomic verse contains maxims of popular wisdom, that is, short impressive statements of general truths. The word ‘gnomic’ is derived from early Greek poetry (6th century BC) of this type, but many ancient cultures embodied wisdom in poetry. The Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament is a case in point; they can also be found in the Scandinavian Eddas, which are the written form of the ancient Germanic oral tradition. For example:

Gold most precious, age most wise;  
Truth is clearest, treasure is dearest,  
Years make prudent who suffers long.  
Woe is close clinging; clouds drift by.  
Good companions encourage a prince  
To glory in battle and giving of gifts.

## Religious poetry

Very little has survived of Anglo-Saxon religious poetry before they were christianised. Hymns sung at festivals, for instance, disappeared. But we still have traces of songs that were probably part of fertility rituals.

The christianisation of the Anglo-Saxons had more important effects on their literature than just the addition of Christian elements to heroic and elegiac narrative poems. By the 8th century the techniques of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry were applied to purely Christian themes. Religious poetry uses the same verse and vocabulary as the heroic pagan poems narrating the exploits of Germanic heroes. Indeed, the Church used the old poetic form in its fight for Christianity. The Christian missionaries saw that they could not simply eradicate the old heroic tradition: so, in their efforts to impose Christianity, they expressed the new subject-matter (i.e., biblical stories) in the old way — they used alliterative and stressed verse, and sounded the old heroic note of the Germanic people. As mentioned above heroic poems were mostly recited at the courts of leaders, definitely of members of the upper class, but those recitals were akin to public performance, and the more people were there to listen the better. This applies to religious heroic poetry as well, of course, with a vengeance.

Two names are connected with this religious poetry: Caedmon and Cynewulf.

1. Caedmon and his school. Caedmon (7th century) is the first Anglo-Saxon Christian poet; he is said to have received the gift of poetry miraculously. Various poetic versions of the Biblical scriptures have been ascribed to him, but the only work known to be his for certain is his first Hymn, said to be composed by Caedmon in a dream, and preserved in Venerable Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* (see below). The other so-called 'Caedmon poems' seem to have been composed later (8th century). These poems are interesting because they show that the vocabulary of praise which the earlier scop used to praise his lord is now applied to God (another kind of 'leader' to be served) and thus how the heroic style was adapted to Biblical subjects.

There are four Caedmonian poems, three of which are based on an Old Testament story:

*Genesis A* (3000 lines). This poem tells the substance of the first 22 chapters of Genesis. Within the poem is included what has been called *Genesis B* which, in addition, deals with the temptation of Adam and Eve and their fall, and with Satan's rebellion. This section, *Genesis B*, shows real poetic imagination at work, and an ability to give vigorous life to the traditional character of Satan, the rebel.

*Exodus* (8th century). In this poem, the influence of Germanic heroic poetry is clearly felt. The Biblical narrative is followed less strictly than in *Genesis A* and at some stage Moses emerges as 'a glorious hero' leading a warlike people (the people of Israel who had been enslaved in Egypt) to freedom and victory, through the desert to the promised land.

*Christ and Satan*. In this poem, the poet works not directly from Biblical sources but from a variety of Christian traditions. Here we get a picture of Satan in hell, which presents him not as the rebellious spirit of *Genesis B* but as a lost soul lamenting bitterly his exclusion from the joys of heaven. There is true elegiac eloquence in this poem, which announces the other (later) school, that of Cynewulf (9th century).

2. Cynewulf and his school. The poems ascribed to Cynewulf and his school show a more self-conscious craftsmanship on the part of the poet(s) than those of the Caedmon school. Instead of the Germanic heroic trend we find here a more contemplative and meditative tone, as in *Christ, Juliana, Elene*, and *The Fate of the Apostles* — the first being a poem about the Ascension, and the others about the lives of saints. So, with

Cynewulf, Anglo-Saxon religious poetry moves beyond Biblical paraphrase into the didactic, the devotional, and the mystical.

Among these poems there is one, *The Dream of the Rood*, which really stands out. It is the oldest surviving English poem in the form of a dream or vision. The dreamer says that he had a vision of the bright cross ('rood'), brilliantly adorned with gems; and he goes on to tell the speech that the cross uttered. The cross tells of its origin in the forest, its removal to be made into a cross for 'the Master of Mankind', its horror at the role it had to play, but also its determination to play this role all the same since it was God's command. It further tells of the sufferings of the 'young hero' (Christ) who ascended the cross in order to redeem mankind. All this is done with a keen note of religious passion and wonder.

Though some of the Anglo-Saxon religious poems, especially those by Cynewulf and his school, express personal devotional feelings, none of them can be said to be really lyrical in character, or to have been written primarily for the purpose of exploring personal emotions.

### 3. Old English prose

The Anglo-Saxon invaders of Britain brought with them their own poetry, but there is no evidence of their having possessed any literary prose tradition. So the development of prose does not go back to earlier Germanic origins, as that of poetry does; it takes place wholly in England, and largely as a result of Christianisation.

#### **Anglo-Latin prose**

This section refers to prose works written in Latin in England. In the Middle Ages Latin was the language of learning, of philosophy, theology, of the Church and of all the religious scholars who lived and studied in monasteries and abbey-houses, which were the centres of learning at the time (before the universities were created).

The Venerable Bede (673-735) was one of these scholars. He spent most of his life studying in the monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow, and gained a European reputation with his famous *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which he wrote in Latin and completed in 731. It offers a summary of events from the Roman invasion to the arrival of St Augustine in 597, and a detailed account of the years 597-731. Bede has

been called ‘the Father of English history’; we owe him much of what is known about English society in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

In the century after the Venerable Bede (i.e., in the 9th century), the Danish invasions broke up the new Christian civilisation that was beginning to flourish under the influence of Bede at Jarrow, and of other religious scholars in other abbey-houses, as these monasteries were burned down and destroyed by the invaders.

Fortunately, another great man, King Alfred, did much to save (and bring within the range of the people) the most significant aspects of earlier thought that had been damaged during the Danish invasions: he and a team of scholars he had invited translated many of these Latin works into English. These translations contributed to the beginning of English prose.

### **Old English secular prose**

Roughly speaking, English prose begins under the reign of King Alfred in an attempt by the King and his associates to make important aspects of earlier thought accessible to the governing class and to the clergy, whose education suffered under the Danish invasions — they hardly knew Latin any more as an effect of the destruction of the monasteries. Alfred achieved this by translating works from Latin into the vernacular (the language people spoke, that is at the time, Old English).

King Alfred is known in political history for his success in stopping the Danish conquest in England and for creating, among the Anglo-Saxon peoples and kingdoms, an awareness of their unity as Englishmen (indeed he unified the little kingdoms in the south of England). He played a role in history as a statesman, as a military strategist, as a patriot, but also as a leading figure in the world of letters or culture.

Alfred's translations from Latin include his translation of Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Rule* as a manual for the instruction of the clergy. While Bede had died translating the Gospels into OE, Alfred translated the Psalms. He used his AS rendition of the Ten commandments as an epigraph to his own book of laws. In order to get his people (and the clergy) to know the religious history and organization of their country, he also translated Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

Moreover, he translated a *History of the World* written by a rather obscure figure called Orosius; and he introduced into it two accounts by contemporary travellers, which testifies to his inquiring mind and to his openness to contemporary events and records.

He also wrote a *Book of Blossoms*, a sort of anthology derived mostly from the soliloquies of St Augustine.<sup>15</sup> In his Preface, he compares himself to a man collecting wood in a vast forest which contains plenty of material for all kinds of buildings — i.e., works of the past that can be useful to build the present. This is an appropriate image for expressing Alfred's purpose: to bring to his contemporaries a knowledge of the works of the past.

Alfred's own contribution to English prose, not through his translations but through his historical works, is an important phenomenon in itself, because prose is the best medium for the writing of history (it is more accurate or precise than poetry); and thanks to Alfred's example the English were the first in Europe to use prose rather than poetry for the writing of historical works.

It is under his authority that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was begun. It is a history compiled by monks at different centres and at different periods, which presents an outline of English history from the time of Julius Caesar's invasion to the middle of the 5th century (the time of the Germanic invasions); then the *Chronicle* goes on in the form of annals (yearly reports) telling what happened during Alfred's own life. Incidentally, one of the seven manuscripts that we have of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* continues until 1154. Its most famous passages are those which describe Alfred's struggle with Danish invaders and the people's plight during the civil wars under King Stephen (1135-1154).

Besides its historical interest, the *Chronicle* is interesting because it shows the development of the language from Old to Middle English (later, we shall see the impact of the Norman Conquest (1066) on the writing of historical works in English prose).

## Religious prose

Around 950-960, **Aldred**, a member of the community of St Cuthbert that had fled the monastery of Lindisfarne when it was raided by the Vikings, translated the Latin text of

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<sup>15</sup> Saint Augustine (354-430 AD), one of the Fathers of the Christian Church, who profoundly influenced both Catholic and Protestant theology, notably through his *Confessions*, a spiritual autobiography; not to be confused with the Christian monk who christianized the Jutes from the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and who became the first Archbishop of Canterbury at the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> (see p. 4).

the Lindisfarne Gospels into the vernacular and added glosses which “reveal concern with monastic reform and abuses of clerical power”.<sup>16</sup>

**Aelfric** (end of the 10th - beginning of the 11th century) wrote homilies and lives of saints. He is also the first translator of the first seven books of the Old Testament into a West Saxon form of Old English (the first five books known as the Pentateuch and the next two books – Joshua and Judges). Like most medieval translators he was working from the Latin version of the Bible by Saint Jerome, the Vulgate.

**Wulfstan** is another religious prose writer of the same period (10-11th centuries). He was Archbishop of York and wrote sermons in a fiery and passionate prose style which appears at its best in his *Sermon to the English*. Here he gives a vivid picture of the horrors brought about by the second wave of Danish invasions: he describes the desolation of the country and condemns the vices and lack of stamina of the people.

A fairly exhaustive reference website on Old English literature :

<http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/ballc/oe/oe-texts.html>.

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<sup>16</sup> Michelle P. Brown, *Painted Labyrinth The World of the Lindisfarne Gospels*, The British Library 2003, p.13.

## THE MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD (1066-1485)

### 1. Historical background

The Norman conquest was the last of a series of migrations which put an end to the Roman Empire and brought into being a new (medieval) Europe. As Christian values and practices established themselves, the social structure was altered — and the literature changed accordingly.

The heroic age was replaced by a feudal society. It was based on the ownership of land and on strictly defined bonds between social strata; it introduced new conventions of service, honour and obligation of the vassals to their lords; these conventions were expressed in the literature of the period. Indeed, new kinds of courtly sophistication in manners replaced the heroic ideal. The change is noticeable on the Continent as well, in the shift from the *chanson de geste*<sup>17</sup> to the Arthurian romances (medieval fictions in verse dealing with adventures of chivalry and love) with their stress on courtly behaviour and on the new ideals of love and honour.

With the crowning of William the Conqueror in 1066, a Norman dynasty was established in England, which would last until 1154. Then the Plantagenets occupied the throne until 1485, which marks the end of the Middle English period.

A number of events took place between these two landmarks. The end of the 11th century (1095) saw the beginning of the Crusades: i.e., a number of military expeditions undertaken by the Christians in Europe allegedly to try and recover the 'Holy Land' from the 'Mohamedans' or 'Saracens', though not without economic and political side-effects. These Crusades lasted until the middle of the 13th century (they started under the Normans and ended under the Plantagenets).

In 1215 King John (nicknamed 'Lackland' because he lost Normandy) had to issue a document known as the 'Great Charter', or 'Magna Carta'. "King John's unsuccessful attempts to defend his dominions in Normandy and much of western France led to oppressive demands on his subjects. Taxes were extortionate; reprisals against defaulters were ruthless, and John's administration of justice was considered capricious. In January

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<sup>17</sup> In France, the classic example is the *Chanson de Roland* (11th century); the subject matter of the *chansons* was in part legendary and in part historical, dealing with famous battles (often between Christians and Moors), the Crusades, or the struggle for power between barons and their king.



1215 a group of barons demanded a charter of liberties as a safeguard against the king's arbitrary behaviour. The barons took up arms against John and captured London in May 1215. By 10 June both parties met and held negotiations at Runnymede, a meadow by the River Thames. The concessions made by King John were outlined in a document known as the 'Articles of the Barons', to which the king's great seal was attached, and on 19 June the barons renewed their oaths of allegiance to the king. Meanwhile the royal chancery produced a formal royal grant, based on the agreements reached at Runnymede, which became known as **Magna Carta**." "**Magna Carta** is often thought of as the corner-stone of liberty and the chief defence against arbitrary and unjust rule in England. In fact it contains few sweeping statements of principle, but is a series of concessions wrung from the unwilling King John by his rebellious barons in 1215. However, Magna Carta established for the first time a very significant constitutional principle, namely that the power of the king could be limited by a written grant."<sup>18</sup> The text confirmed the rights and privileges of the clergy, it defined the rights and privileges of the aristocracy (the Barons) and of the gentry (i.e., the Knights and other wealthy freemen from the country), but it also includes articles that explicitly refer to the importance of borrowing money (at the time necessarily from Jews, since usury was banned by the Church)<sup>19</sup> and to trading activities (including international trade). In order to facilitate transactions, it establishes national standards in various measures. In that it regulates the King's power this document marks the beginning of a long process which would culminate in a system of parliamentary monarchy (with the Glorious Revolution in 1688), and eventually in the democratic system which emerged in the 20th century (after the First World War).

The Hundred Years' War saw England and France confront each other from the mid-14th century to the mid-15th century. It was during this period that the English Peasants' Revolt took place (mainly in south-east England, in 1381). In 1422 Henry VI became King of France, and Joan of Arc was burnt at the stake in 1431.

The 15th century was a period of transition in England. This is clear in both the political and the economic fields. The year 1455 marked the beginning of the War of the Roses (between the Houses of York and Lancaster), which ended in 1485 with the death of Richard III and the accession to the throne of Henry VII, Earl of Richmond, who belonged to the House of Tudor and brought together the Houses of Lancaster (red rose)

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<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.bl.uk/collections/treasures/magna.html>. The same site offers a number of illuminating texts.

<sup>19</sup> Note that Jews were expelled from Britain in 1290 and were not allowed back until the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. .

and of York (white rose).<sup>20</sup> During the war the nobility had destroyed each other, which contributed to the rise of the middle class. The development of international trade that accompanied the Crusades also boosted the importance of the merchant class. The feudal system thus developed into a less rigid society based on trade, and eventually (and very gradually) died out.<sup>21</sup>

Printing had been developed centuries earlier in the Far East (China, Japan, Korea). The primary motive for introducing it to Western Europe was economic : the Church realized that the commerce of indulgences could be even more lucrative if they printed ready-made forms to be filled in by the pardoners (or sellers of indulgences). The first printer to set up shop in England was Caxton in 1476.<sup>22</sup> Books became more readily available and as a consequence a new class of readers developed and information started circulating more freely, which contributed to the public's interest in the movement known as 'humanism' (which started in Italy in the 14th century).

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The result of the Norman Conquest was the establishment of a new French-speaking aristocracy in England. The Normans occupied all the important positions in the State and in the Church, and Norman-French became the language of the governing classes (the court, the aristocracy, and the clergy) while Anglo-Saxon, now developing into Middle English, naturally continued to be spoken by the mass of the people — i.e., mainly uneducated people.

The court being French, there was a literature written in French (by Anglo-Norman authors and scribes). This literature reached a climax under the reign of Henry II (1154-1189), the first Plantagenet and a great-grandson of William the Conqueror, who owned vast territories in France.

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<sup>20</sup> Shakespeare's history plays, though ideologically marked, are a useful source of information on those troubled times.

<sup>21</sup> It can be argued that most of the Continent was still predominantly feudal until the French revolution and its aftermath whereas the power of the merchant class, and thus of capitalism, had asserted itself much earlier in England – most dramatically under the Commonwealth. See second part of the course, next year.

<sup>22</sup> William Caxton (1422-91) set up the first English press in 1476-77. He printed not only the works of other English writers but also books from other countries which he translated into excellent English prose, for instance Reynard the Fox, translated from the Dutch. One of the first books he produced was *Aesop's Fables*.

In 1204, however, under King John 'Lackland', Normandy was lost for the English, and as a result the connection between the Anglo-Normans (that is, the Normans in England) and the French aristocracy in France was weakened. From this moment onwards a slow process of integration began, and the French speakers living in England gradually blended with the English to form only one people. The break with France favoured the recovery of the English language, which was now used in all circles, even though many French words were introduced into English. By the beginning of the 14th century English had reasserted itself as one of the languages used in literature in England.

One can distinguish three phases in the use of language in the Middle English period which determined the development of English literature:

(1) Up to 1250, the new forms of poetry meant for the entertainment of the aristocracy and the court were written in French, while the English language was only used by the clergy in works intended for the common people — these are mainly religious works to instruct the people about the Bible and the 'right' ways of living (Latin was used for the clerics.).

(2) After 1250, when the upper classes began to use English, and up to 1350, we get a more varied literature in English, which includes both religious works aiming at edification, and now also a secular literature aiming at entertainment. The first English romances in verse, which replaced heroic poetry, date from the second half of the 13th century.

(3) After 1350 English was used by everyone and had been enriched and refined by the experimental efforts of the preceding poets, so that we reach a climax in Middle English literature. The end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century is known as a period of great individual writers.

The existence of a French-speaking ruling class in England temporarily interrupted the development of English literature, though there were 'compensations'.

In the 12th century, French poetry was more advanced than English poetry; it provided a large body of new material for English poets to draw upon, and gave them new models and standards for imitation (for example the romance, the new kind of aristocratic narrative verse). As we have seen, it is partly as an effect of the popularity of

the romance that the old heroic tone was replaced by new kinds of courtly sophistication in manners and feelings.

The old alliterative verse was largely replaced by the French syllabic and rhyming verse (though we shall see that there was a remarkable revival of the alliterative verse in the 14th century).

On the other hand, thanks to the seminal work of King Alfred (among others), Anglo-Saxon prose had become much more advanced than anything in French prose. Under French influence, therefore, historical writings were written either in French verse or in Latin. To this extent, in the field of prose the French influence was a drawback — it restricted the range and the development of English prose till the 14th century.

Simultaneously, the tradition of Anglo-Latin literature continued to develop. Latin was the learned language of the Christian world in the Middle Ages (it was the language of theology, philosophy, history, and also of a great deal of poetry). Moreover, Latin was used for all official documents.

Of these Anglo-Latin works — i.e., works written in Latin but produced in England — the most remarkable is Geoffrey Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, a historical work written in verse in the 12th century. It gives a picture of the Anglo-Saxon invasions as seen through the eyes of the retreating Celts; and it is full of characters that were to become famous in English literature. It is here that the stories of Lear and Cymbeline appeared for the first time; we also find for the first time the full story of the exploits of King Arthur.

There was also an important body of French literature written in England, especially in the 12th and the 13th centuries. Many French chroniclers wrote in verse. Among them, Wace is particularly noteworthy because he translated Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. His translation (his *Roman de Brut*) marks an important stage in the transmission of the Arthurian legends: it mentions the knights of the Round Table for the first time. Wace's work was then translated into English verse in the 13th century by Layamon, and this is how the Arthurian legends appeared in English literature.

Among the works of poetry written in French in England there were a number of romances: i.e., stories written purely for entertainment and based on action and adventure but also on sentiment (courtly love in particular).

There were also Breton lais (i.e., verse narratives or lyrical pieces, so called because they were introduced by minstrels from Brittany and dealt with Celtic matters). They were generally based on folklore and often referred to the supernatural. The best-known author of Breton lais was Marie de France, who dedicated her lais to Henry II (12th century), the first of the Plantagenets (who owned vast territories in France).

## 2. Middle English prose

Anglo-Saxon prose held a remarkable position among European literatures at the beginning of the Middle English period; there were translations from Latin, homilies, didactic and devotional religious works and, most importantly, historical writings (the English tradition being the first to use prose to deal with history).

As far as historical writings are concerned, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* started by King Alfred in the 9th century came to an end in 1154. Latin and French verse was then used for historical records (as was the tradition in France), and English historical prose would only re-emerge under the Tudors in the early 16th century.

On the other hand, religious prose in English was not similarly superseded by Latin or French forms. After the Conquest, English prose continued to be used by the clergy to instruct the common people in religious matters, especially women since few of them knew Latin. These religious prose works in English thus ensured the continuity and the survival of English prose during this period and up to the 15th and 16th centuries (when there was a revival of prose in English).

### **Early religious prose in English**

The Katherine Group is the name given to five Middle English works of devotional prose, three of which focus on the lives of a virgin Saint: Katherine, Margaret and Juliana. They insist on the discomforts of married life, and consequently on the advantages of virginity. They were addressed to a female audience and exalted martyrdom (these female saints argued that they were Christ's brides). The fourth text is called 'Holy Maidenhood' and praises virginity while presenting a horrible picture of motherhood and married life.

*Ancrene Wisse* (also called *Ancrene Riwle*) is a book of devotional advice, a manual of instruction intended for three young girls who had decided to become anchoresses (female hermits); it was written by a chaplain in about 1230. It is the most remarkable prose work written between the work of King Alfred and that of Malory (late 15th

century). Just as religious poems are pervaded with the heroic spirit of the Old English period, so is the new courtly love spirit to be found in this work, in which Christ is the perfect knight. It deals with matters of religious observance and with the advantages of a life of retirement from the world, and also with all sorts of temptations which must be resisted. Furthermore, it gives specific advice on all sorts of domestic matters (the way anchoresses would eat and dress, for instance).

The interest of this work today lies in the author's use of proverbs, anecdotes, character sketches and realistic details of all kinds; there are also many references to matters of daily life (domestic affairs, farming, travel, sports, etc). This makes the work an important document about the time, with human interest added to it.

It has important thematic and linguistic connections with the Katherine Group; linguistically, both works seem to have been written in a West Midland dialect (quite removed from the kind of English spoken further south). It is a distinctive and interesting language from a period when English was undergoing a transition. Moreover, these two prose works ensured the transmission of the English prose tradition at a time when it was threatened by the French influence (up to the mid-14th century).

### **Later religious prose works**

In the 14th century the religious prose works were no longer didactic only.

Some were written by great contemplative mystical writers like Richard Rolle of Hampole (c. 1300-1349) and his followers, for example Walter Hilton (d. 1396). The latter is the mystical author of *The Scale of Perfection*, which has something in common with the work of Richard Rolle and with *The Cloud of Unknowing*.<sup>23</sup>

As to *The Cloud of Unknowing*, it is one of the most admired products of the Middle English mystical tradition, and dates from the second half of the 14th century. Its author was presumably a priest, though no certain identification of him has been possible. The enigmatic title refers to the intellectual blankness, or the blankness of ignorance, that one should achieve in contemplation, in order to know God. The idea is that the soul must concentrate on God as he is in himself, wholly and solely; not on his goods or his attributes, the consideration of which would detract from the purity of contemplation. Consider the following passage:

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<sup>23</sup> Mysticism is an intensely personal experience in which the subject (who in cases of literary works is also the writer) feels some sort of ineffable fusion with the divinity.

Lift up your heart to God with humble love: and mean God himself, and not what you get out of him. Indeed, hate to think of anything but God himself, so that nothing occupies your mind or will but only God. Try to forget all created things that he ever made, and the purpose behind them, so that your thought and longing do not turn or reach out to them either in general or in particular. Let them go, and pay no attention to them. It is the work of the soul that pleases God most. [...]

Do not give up then, but work away at it till you have this longing. When you first begin, you find only darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing. You don't know what this means except that in your will you feel a simple steadfast intention reaching out towards God. Do what you will, this darkness and this cloud remain between you and God, and stop you both from seeing him in the clear light of rational understanding, and from experiencing his loving sweetness in your affection. Reconcile yourself to wait in this darkness as long as is necessary, but still go on longing after him whom you love. For if you are to feel him or to see him in this life, it must always be in this cloud, in this darkness. And if you will work hard at what I tell you, I believe that through God's mercy you will achieve this very thing. (translated into modern English)

Julian of Norwich, who was turned into a saint by the Catholic Church, lived in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. She became an anchoress attached to a Benedictine community and wrote in a similar mystical vein. There are two versions of her work *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*, one written about the time of the mystical revelation she experienced around 1373 and a longer one apparently written around 1393. Christ is perceived as a mothering figure.

John Wycliffe (?1320-84), who was a fellow at the University of Oxford, had a completely different attitude from the members of the Rolle group since they were contemplative mystics who withdrew from the world whereas Wycliffe was a controversialist philosopher and a reformer who attacked some of the claims and practices of the Church. For example, he thought that the Church should not concern itself with temporal matters, and that the clergy should have no right to hold property. He considered that the Church had become too worldly, and he urged the King to take back the possessions of the Church and to restore the clergy to their original poverty.

Wycliffe wrote social works which reveal his progressive attitude: in *Of Servants and Lords* he defends the peasants' revolt of 1381; and in *Wedded Men and Wives* he deals with marriage and the rearing of children.

Yet his great significance lies in the Bible translations which he instigated (Aelfric had only translated the first books of the Bible into Old English). Indeed, Wycliffe insisted on the absolute authority of the Bible in all questions concerning man's moral and spiritual life, and since the Church (which is supposed to act as the interpreter of the Word of God) was highly corrupt, he wanted people to have direct access to the Bible in

a language which they could understand —i.e., English and not Latin. Wycliffe's belief in man's direct and individual relation to God through the Bible announces the protestant attitude. Indeed Wycliffe anticipated the Reformation which divided Europe in the 16th century; in fact he exerted an influence on John Huss and his followers in Bohemia, and through them perhaps eventually on Luther. Wycliffe's Bible is regarded as one of the foundation works of English prose. There were two translations (1382 and 1388), of which the second is better. His disciples were called 'Lollards' (because they were mumbling away passages they had learned by heart); they were accused of heresy and many were burnt at the stake.

In conclusion, it appears that where Rolle and the mystics had made their religion personal in a highly subjective way Wycliffe was concerned with his fellow humans' lot and attempted to restore meaning to religious life at a time when the Church and the clergy were more engrossed in worldly riches than with spiritual life.

### **More prose works**

A 14th-century French writer wrote the *Travels of Sir John de Mandeville*, which is a work of fiction or compilation from narratives by other travellers, but claiming to be an account of genuine journeys written by Mandeville himself. The work was translated into English in 1377, became extremely popular, and was long regarded as genuine. (Long after the extravagances of the story were seen to be inventions, Mandeville, a purely fictional English knight, was thought to be the genuine author. In fact Sir John Mandeville never existed, and the author of the work never set foot away from home.)

In this work the traveller pretends to have seen incredible things: a gigantic race of people with one eye in the middle of their forehead, people with no heads but with eyes in their shoulders, others with great ears hanging to their knees.

The work was meant as a guide-book for a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (remember that the Crusades lasted until the middle of the 13th century); but then the author goes on to narrate other imaginary travels: to Egypt, to Persia, to China.

John Trevisa's translations are also worth mentioning: he translated many medieval Latin works into the vernacular, among which a bestseller of the time, the *Polychronikon*, a history of the world. In his preface to this massive work he deals with the controversial issue of translation. His prose is ornate and shows a certain degree of conscious artistry. This is why he can be seen to anticipate the sophistication and the



sense of balance in prose style that would be found at the time of the Renaissance (and which is called ‘eupheism’).

Prose works in the Middle English period are important first because they helped to keep a certain standard of English prose alive, from its astonishing early beginnings (with King Alfred in the 9th century) through the difficult period when the very existence of English prose was threatened by the predominance of French verse, up to the late 15th century when the increasing use of English prose for both secular and religious writings meant that the danger of seeing English forever superseded by French was definitely over.

### 3. Middle English narrative poetry

#### **Religious didactic poetry**

Before tackling the new genre of the romance, it will be useful to consider didactic poetry (in its religious and secular varieties). There was no break in the writing of **religious** didactic poetry, a tradition which was inaugurated in the Old English period with the schools of Caedmon and Cynewulf. This kind of writing was meant for the ordinary people and was written in alliterative verse up to the early 13th century.

This poetry consists mainly in paraphrases of the Bible, which it tried to make more accessible and attractive to the public. All the important incidents in the Old and the New Testament are thus recycled and paraphrased, as well as various other moral and religious topics. Note that in the course of the 13th century, alliterative verse was gradually replaced by the French octosyllabic rhyming couplet. Nevertheless, the alliterative tradition survived in the background and led in the 14th century to what is called the alliterative revival, a group of famous poems which we shall discuss later.

#### **Secular didactic poetry**

Beside this religious didactic poetry, there is an interesting and amusing **secular** didactic poem called *The Owl and the Nightingale*: this is an early and subtle example of octosyllabic couplets (a French form), and an interesting manifestation of a French kind of poetry (which already existed in Latin) called the *débat* (or contest). Traditionally this is a poetic debate on some moral or political subject, in which you get the pros and cons on a particular subject. *The Owl and the Nightingale* is a very entertaining contest between two birds presented with great vividness. On the one hand, you have the

respectable and serious owl, and on the other hand the light and hedonistic (pleasure-loving) nightingale. The two birds represent contrasting points of view, and perhaps also different kinds of poetry (the didactic versus the worldly amorous world of the romance). The author, often reported as a Nicholas of Guildford, gives an account of the character of the two speakers but also of aspects of daily life at the time.

The author comes across the two birds in a secluded spot in an unnamed valley; the nightingale is hidden in a thick hedge and safe from its opponent's claws, while the owl is perched on an old tree-stump. The nightingale launches the assault with open insults: 'Monster', it says, 'Fly away! I am the worse for seeing thee. Thy ugliness spoils my song. When I hear thy foul howling I would rather spit than sing!'

The owl waits until evening to reply, and although it is ready to burst with rage, it keeps its emotions under control. The nightingale, it says, is quite wrong about the owl's intentions. If once the nightingale would come out into the open, it would sing another tune. This of course the nightingale declines to do, and instead continues to attack its opponent: 'Thou art loathsome to behold [...] Thy body is short, thy neck is small, thy head is greater than the rest of thee.' In this vein it accuses the owl of unclean habits, of raising a filthy brood that defiles its own nest, and of being in general representative of all that is worthless; after which, the nightingale breaks out into a melodious song.

The owl listens, puffed out and swollen as if it 'had swallowed a frog', says the poet. Then they agree to argue their case before a suitable judge.

The dispute then starts revolving around the respective merits of their singing. The owl accuses the nightingale of singing amatory<sup>24</sup> songs and of leading men and women to sin. The nightingale retorts that the owl is a bird of ill omen, whose song is always a sign of sorrow and misfortune. This goes on for a while, but the poet cleverly disclaims any knowledge of the outcome (i.e., of the judge's final decision).

The poem has been interpreted as symbolizing the antagonism between beauty and pleasure on the one hand, and moral asceticism on the other; between gaiety and gravity, art and philosophy, the minstrel and the preacher, the ideals of the new love poetry of courtly origin as opposed to the religious, didactic poetry so prominent in Medieval verse.

*The Owl and the Nightingale* is a poem in which the poet gives life and spirit to a Latin and French tradition, the *débat*, which he exploits beautifully by opposing the

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<sup>24</sup> Or amatorial: related to or inciting sexual love or desire.

values of two antagonistic approaches to life and literature, one light and cheerful and one serious and moralizing, two views which we can in fact recognize in every age.

Actually it is didactic only up to a point, since it leaves its readers or listeners free to choose (or not to choose) whichever side they find more appealing.

### **Verse romances**

Another kind of narrative poetry, which assumed increasing importance in this period as an effect of the Norman conquest, is the **verse romance** (originally a French genre). The French romance is a narrative poem in octosyllabic and rhyming lines; it combines action and sentiment (the French '*amour courtois*', in English 'courtly love').

In England, the replacement of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry by the verse romance marks a significant change in taste and sensibility, which reflects the changes which took place in society (from a heroic society to a feudal one, with its conventions of service to a lord and 'refined' manners and morals).

To appreciate the change, we should remember that Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry was stern in mood and realistic in treatment, and that it often dealt with the exploits of heroes who had some real place in history; the romance, on the contrary, is more frankly escapist, and the marvellous is introduced for its own sake. Fighting in heroic poetry was a grim affair, in which the hero fought for a specific purpose (cf *Beowulf*), often for his own life or that of others. In this sense, heroic poetry was only a reflection of the age, which was an age of conquests and migrations in which one had to be a warrior in order to survive. Even the most courageous hero was liable to lose if his enemy turned out to be stronger; the importance of fate in their world-view was consequently enormous. In the romance the hero is a knight, and he fights on principle as it were, or as a matter of fashion; here fighting is equalled to a game, a sport, in which the reward is the love of a lady. The result of the fight depends on the character of the fighter (and no longer on fate): if he is morally good he is bound to win, and the whole thing is done ritualistically as a stylized sport rather than a desperate necessity.

In the mid-13th century the French romances were translated into English. The English translators adapted the sophisticated and sentimental French romances for a much less sophisticated English audience, who were more interested in the story (in action) than in refined speculations about courtly love and honour — which were characteristic of the courtly love tradition in France. So, the English versions of these

romances were usually shorter, cruder, and more straightforward (more centred on the story) than their French counterparts.

Some English romances deal with England in its connection with Scandinavian neighbours (these are known as belonging to the 'Matter of England'); others go back to the Celtic past of the island (the 'Matter of Britain'); and yet others do not fit any these categories.

*Matter of England.* These romances deal with English history, particularly with the Scandinavian raids on England. The earliest English romance is *King Horn* (c. 1250), which is based on a romance originally written in French. It tells about the adventures of Horn, a prince who is driven out of his country (in the south-west of Scotland) by pagan invaders (probably Scandinavians). With a dozen companions he is abandoned at sea and comes to the shore of Westerness, where the King's daughter, Rimenhild, falls in love with him. However, Horn must leave her to prove his knightly qualities; he returns after destroying a pirate crew. But when the King finds Horn and his daughter embracing, he banishes the knight who goes to fight in Ireland. (One sees the importance of action in these stories.) He returns once again to Westerness, this time in disguise since he has been banished, and he arrives just in time to prevent the marriage of Rimenhild with another prince. After further complications, Horn kills his rival, regains his own kingdom, and marries his faithful and patient Rimenhild.

The poem is written in short rhyming couplets, like the French romances, and yet the lines are not syllabic (as they would be in French) but accentuated; this is an interesting stage in a gradual process whereby the alliterative line gives way to the French type of line.

This early English romance illustrates the way in which English romancers left out the courtly elements of the French version, so that the focus falls on action and adventure rather than on the love story. There is a sense in which love is only mentioned as a pretext for more adventures. The story of *King Horn*, with its folk elements of exile and return and the reuniting of the lovers, shows how a legend originally inspired by history can be enlarged upon and modified by folk material, and become an unsophisticated English romance.

The plot of *Havelok the Dane* (late 13th century) is also inspired by the Viking invasions. It is written in octosyllabic couplets; and though it is based, like *King Horn*, on an earlier French narrative, here again we miss the French interest for courtly

sophistication. Instead, what is stressed is respect for honest labour — the hero is associated most of the time with common people and their daily activities.

*Havelok the Dane* is a well-structured tale of adventure. The first part deals with the story of an English princess who becomes an orphan at the age of two and is treacherously shut up in a castle by a wicked counsellor of her dead father. The second part centres on the life of Havelok, the son of the King of Denmark, who after the death of his father becomes the victim of a similar treachery. Yet, with the help of some Danish fishermen, Havelok flees to England where he lives a humble life among the common folk. Havelok's great triumph lies not in knightly deeds of honour, but in his sunny and cheerful disposition, which makes him popular among the fishermen — and he himself is quite willing, even though he was born a Prince, to accept his humble lot as a fisher boy. In the third part, Havelok (now a grown-up man) goes to Lincoln where he gets a job with the Earl of Lincoln's cook. He then marries an English princess who, however, considers the marriage an outrage to her rank. Yet one night she is told by an angel that she has in fact married the son of a king. In her joy she wakes him up from a dream that will later come true: he regains his kingdom of Denmark, conquers England and rewards all those who were good to him (all of them common people by birth).

Though both *King Horn* and *Havelok the Dane* are based on earlier French narratives, they seem to reflect the spirit and the taste of the English middle class, rather than those of the refined French aristocracy. It seems, then, that their authors were not connected with the court.

*Matter of Britain.* These romances are based on the Celtic tradition of King Arthur, which was popular in Wales, Cornwall and Brittany. The surviving romances about the matter of Britain are the most interesting illustrations of the genre in England. There are two *Morte d'Arthur* but the best romance in this group is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late 14th century). This poem was written in the north-west Midland dialect and it belongs to what is known as the alliterative revival of the 14th century (see below). Actually the poem is a rare combination of the French and Anglo-Saxon verse traditions: indeed it is arranged in stanzas, each containing a number of long alliterative lines (as in the Anglo-Saxon tradition) followed by five short rhyming lines (as in the French tradition). The poet's technical skills combine with his talent for setting a scene and for showing the movement of the seasons as reflected in the changing face of nature.

The story opens at the court of King Arthur, who is celebrating New Year's Eve with his Queen Guinevere and his Knights. The feast is interrupted by the appearance of a

strange and menacing Green Knight, who asks for a volunteer among the Knights of the Round Table to behead him with the heavy axe he provides for the purpose, and on condition that a year and a day later, the knight would come and receive a similar blow from him. The Knights are amazed and silent, and Arthur himself is led to volunteer; but Gawain, a model of courtesy, nobility and courage, steps forth and gives the blow: he strikes off the Green Knight's head, but the Knight simply picks it up and rides off, asking Gawain to be true to his word and to appear at the Green Chapel a year and a day later to receive a similar blow.

The seasons change from winter to spring, then to summer, then autumn, with angry winds and leaves falling from the trees, and finally to winter again.

In the new year, Gawain sets out to look for the Green Chapel to keep his promise. On his way he seeks shelter at a castle where he is kindly and generously entertained by the lord and lady of the place. Each morning the lord goes off to hunt — his hunting is described with lively details that recall Anglo-Saxon vigour *and* the French taste for hunting, a blending that is reflected in the vocabulary: native English words next to French jargon terms — while Gawain stays in the castle and is tempted by the lady, who wants to make love to him. He has a difficult time retaining his perfect courtesy and at the same time rejecting the lady's advances, since as a Knight of the Round Table Gawain is supposed to remain the pure and chaste servant of Queen Guinevere. So Gawain goes no further than allow a few kisses to the lady.

Gawain and the lord of the castle have promised to exchange in the evening whatever they have gained during the day, so that, in accordance with the bargain, the lord gives Gawain the animals he has killed during the day, and Gawain gives him the kisses he has received from the lady. But on the last day the lady presses Gawain to accept a memento from her, and he accepts a green girdle which, she says, will give him invulnerability, and which he will require for his encounter with the Green Knight. Yet Gawain says nothing of the girdle to the lord, and he leaves the castle to find the Green Chapel, which turns out to be a grassy mound nearby. He meets the Green Knight who strikes him with his huge axe but deflects the blow as Gawain flinches. He strikes a second blow, and this time Gawain remains steady but turns away the blow. The third time the axe touches Gawain but only wounds him very lightly. Gawain now says that he has kept his promise and demands a chance of a fair fight, but the Green Knight good-naturedly laughs at what he calls Gawain's 'ferocity', and reveals himself as the lord of the castle. The slight wound on Gawain's neck is his punishment for the girdle which he

took away from the lady in order to preserve his life. Gawain, humiliated, admits his weakness and reproaches himself bitterly, yet the Green Knight absolves him and tells him to keep the girdle.

On his return to Arthur's court Gawain honestly tells the whole story, not as a heroic deed but as an example of moral failure: Arthur comforts him and all the Knights agree to wear a green belt for Gawain's sake — as an emblem of man's liability to fail: i.e., of the fallibility of the human condition.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the finest Arthurian and courtly romance in English. Although it exemplifies the knightly virtues of courage and honour but also man's imperfection, it is not a story told to enforce a moral (it is not didactic): it is told for its own sake (i.e., for entertainment), for the pleasure of an English aristocratic public interested in an idealized and unrealistic view of life and of themselves.

The plot is skillfully constructed and the narrative is presented with grace and liveliness. From the beginning almost to the end we have a succession of scenes and situations full of colour, movement, and vivid details. There is a description of the New Year feast and an evocation of mirth at Arthur's sophisticated court; the ladies and Queen Guinevere, but also the entrance of the Green Knight, are fully described, and we move from one episode to the next as in a succession of tapestries:<sup>25</sup>

One Christmas in Camelot King Arthur sat  
at ease with his lords and loyal liegemen  
arranged as brothers round the Round Table.  
Their reckless jokes rang about that rich hall  
till they turned from the table to the tournament field  
and jousted like gentlemen with lances and laughs,  
then trooped to court in a carolling crowd.  
For the feast lasted a full fifteen days  
of meals and merriment (as much as could fit.)  
[ . . . ]  
Round they milled in a merry mob till the meal was ready,  
washed themselves well, and walked to their places  
(the best for the best on seats raised above.)  
Then Guinevere moved gaily among them,  
took her place on the dais, which was dearly adorned  
with sides of fine silk and a canopied ceiling  
of sheer stuff: and behind her shimmering tapestries from far Tarsus,  
embroidered, bedecked with bright gems  
that the jewelers would pay a pretty price for  
any day,  
but the finest gem in the field of sight

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<sup>25</sup>

Translations are by Paul Deane. Website <http://alliteration.net/Pearl.htm>.

looked back: her eyes were grey.  
That a lovelier's lived to delight  
the gaze - is a lie, I'd say!

[. . .]

The music had finished but a moment before,  
the first course just served, and set before the court,  
when a horrible horseman hurtled through the doors,  
his body as brawny as any can be,  
so bull-necked, big-thighed, bulky and square,  
so long-legged, large-limbed, looming so tall  
I can hardly tell if he were half troll,  
or merely as large as living man can be --  
a handsome one too; as hearty a hulk as ever rode horse.  
His back and chest were broad as a barrel,  
but he slimmed at the waist, with a slender stomach,  
and his face was well formed, with features sharp  
and clean --

Men sat there gaping, gasping  
at his strange, unearthly sheen,  
as if a ghost were passing,  
for every inch was green.

The poet's use of time is very modern, combining different dimensions, from the mythical to the psychological; he skilfully keeps the various actions moving forward simultaneously, as when he passes from the lady's advances to Gawain in the castle to the husband's adventures in the hunt, then back again to the bed chamber, until all parties are finally brought together at the end of the day:

While the lord found delight in the linden-wood,  
that good man Gawain had a grand bed  
where he dozed while daylight dappled the walls  
and crept through the counterpanes and curtains about him.  
As he drifted half-dreaming, a delicate noise  
sounded softly at the door, which suddenly opened.  
When he heard this he heaved his head from the sheets  
and pulled a corner of the curtain carefully aside,  
warily wondering what it might be.  
It was the lady herself, such a lovely sight,  
who closed the door carefully and quietly behind her  
and bent toward the bed. Blushing the fellow  
lay down and lurked there, looking asleep.

This romance is also interesting for the poet's mastery of dialogue, which always sounds easy and natural; he is particularly skillful in the long conversations between Gawain and the lady, as he seeks to escape but is caught between the necessity to remain polite (according to the conventions of French courtly sophistication) and his desire to remain pure (as a Knight of the Round Table).



"Good morning, Sir Gawain!" she gaily exclaimed.  
 "You're a sound sleeper! I slipped in unnoticed  
 and you are quite my captive! Unless we come to terms  
 I shall bind you in your bed -- of that be quite certain."  
 Delighted the lady laughed as she teased him.  
 "Good morning, gay lady!" answered Gawain blithely.  
 "Just decide on my sentence; it will suit me nicely.  
 I'm your prisoner completely, and plead for your mercy.  
 It's my best bet, so I had better take it!"  
 (So he teased her in turn, returning her laughter.)  
 "But at least, lovely lady, allow me one wish:  
 pardon your prisoner, please let him rise;  
 let me be out of bed, in better apparel,  
 and we'll finish chatting in far greater comfort."  
 "Certainly not, good sir," that sweet lady said.  
 "You'll not budge from your bed: I have better plans.  
 I shall hold you here -- and that other half also --  
 and get to know the knight I've so neatly trapped.  
 I know enough after all, to know of Sir Gawain  
 whom all the world worships; every way you ride  
 your courteous character is acclaimed most nobly  
 by lords and by ladies and all living people.  
 And now you are here, and here we're alone --  
 my lord and his men will be long afield;  
 the servants are sleeping; so are my maidens;  
 I have closed the door, it's securely locked;  
 and since I have in this house he whom all admire,  
 I shall spend my time in speech I am sure  
 to treasure.  
     My person's yours, of course,  
     to see you take your pleasure;  
     I am obliged, perforce,  
     to serve you at your leisure."

On the other hand, the poem is also remarkable for the vividness of the hunting scenes; they are full of physical vigour and as such testify to an earlier Anglo-Saxon influence.

The poem is also remarkable for the poet's feeling for nature and his sensibility to the movement of the seasons, as for example in the description of the chilly winter morning when Gawain leaves the castle to keep his appointment with the Green Knight.

With *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the romance achieves full literary status in England. It is a very original work, yet representative of the time, for it combines and unites the Anglo-Saxon tradition which survived in the north (the Anglo-Saxon vigour, but also the alliterative verses), the Celtic tradition centred in the west (the magical folk elements, as well as the Arthurian legend) and of course the sophistication and polish of the French (and the five short rhyming lines at the end of each stanza). All these

elements are successfully integrated in what comes across as an original English romance.

As was said before, some romances deal neither with English history nor with Celtic legends.

*Floris and Blancheflour* was written in rhymed couplets (French influence) in the 13th century, and it is based on a 12th-century French romance telling a popular love legend of eastern origin. This distant influence is due to the cultural traffic between East and West caused by the crusades and by the many travels of merchants, scholars and pilgrims at the time. Indeed the 13th century was a time characterized by great cross-fertilisation (mutual exchanges) between cultures.

*Floris and Blancheflour* is a product of this cross-fertilisation and it represents a rather refreshing change from the constant fighting and from the tradition of courtly love which otherwise characterized the romance. It is also a change from the traditional treatment of the Saracens as infidels, which is to be found in most French romances dealing with the subject.

Blancheflour, the daughter of a French widow, is captured and carried off to Spain by a Saracen king, who is Floris's father. The two young people fall in love, but Blancheflour is banished. Floris sets off to find her and follows her to the harem of the Emir of Babylon, who is in the end so moved by the tribulations of the lovers that he forgives them and has them married. So this comes across as a romance celebrating a triumphant natural love, rather than the cold rituals of courtly love.

*Sir Orfeo* is another unclassified medieval romance which shows another kind of cross-fertilisation. It is based on the classical story of Orpheus and Eurydice, but the original story is changed into a light-hearted fairy story, full of magic and far removed in tone from the Greek myth of Orpheus's descent into hell. The setting is not Greek but medieval. Some of the background is definitely Celtic, and it incorporates elements from the Breton lays. It is a minstrel's tale of a rescue from fairyland through the power of music combined with the force derived from an exemplary fidelity. Here, Orfeo regains his lady; there is no mention of his not being allowed to look back (as in the Greek myth), and in the English version the story ends happily.

## The fabliau

Not all medieval French narrative poetry was polite and aristocratic, like the romance. From France also came the **fabliau**, a short narrative poem which was realistic, humorous, satirical and often even coarse.

The fabliau and the romance existed side by side but for different publics. The romance begins in France as entertainment for a feudal aristocracy, while the fabliau is, on the contrary, a product of the new rising class of merchants — a class which in fact eventually destroyed feudalism. Indeed the development of an economy based on money and the growth of towns (with their trading activities) gradually took away the very basis of feudalism by encouraging the growth of a class that had no place in it. This new class of town-dwellers who carried on commercial activities were not impressed by courtly notions of love and honour; on the contrary, these merchants were realistic, even iconoclastic or philistine, as they prided themselves on knowing life as it really is, and refused to look at it from a sentimental or idealistic point of view. As a consequence, they favoured a boisterous, realistic and satirical kind of narrative quite opposed to the idealizing vision of the courtly knight or the pious churchman. The fabliau thus represents the first real challenge in European literature to the notions of heroic idealism and of moral sophistication — which find expression in the romance.

Written evidence of fabliaux is rare in England before 1400. The only one to have survived is *Dame Sirith*, a coarse and comic tale about Margery, a merchant's wife, who is tricked into allowing Willikin, a cleric, to make love to her during her husband's absence. Thus Margery argues:

I swear I'll never feed again  
If you've not wasted all your pain;  
So off you go, beloved brother!  
I won't have you, nor any other  
Except my husband. Go away,  
For that's what I shall always say.

Dame Sirith promises that she will help Willikin and the two of them then visit Margery:

MARGERIE: Welcome, Willikin, darling thing!  
You are more welcome than the King!

Oh, Willikin, my precious sweeting,  
I give you my most loving greeting,

And all your will beside.  
You see I've wholly changed my mind:  
I wouldn't dream of being unkind  
In case you drooped and died!

WILLIKIN: Lady, by my fasts till noon,  
I shall devotedly and soon  
Accomplish what you say.  
And now, old mother, you must go;  
For by my faith, you surely know  
That she and I must play.

DAME SIRIZ: God knows I'll leave you, holy sir!  
And see you dabble deep in her  
And stretch her thighs out wide.  
God visit you with every pest  
If you give her any rest  
Whilst lying there inside!

(ad omnes) And so, if any man lacks sense,  
And can't, in spite of all expense,  
Bring his darling to it,  
I'm ready, if he'll only pay  
To set him on the winning way,  
For I know how to do it!

Though fabliaux are rare in our records, the fact that there are many references to (and warnings against) such stories is a proof that they existed and were popular. The clergy, who was very much the guardian of the written word at the time and indeed throughout the Middle Ages, was not keen on this type of literature. Still, there are fabliaux in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (see later), and significantly Chaucer puts them in the mouth of the merchant, the miller, the shipman, which is once again an indication about the class from which these stories emerged.

### **The fable**

Other forms of narrative poetry in the Middle English period include the fable and the ballad. The **fable** is a short narrative in verse in which animals acting as human beings illustrate a simple secular moral. It is a Greek and Latin form which was given new vigour in Europe in the Middle Ages. Though the fable was popular in England in the

12th and 13th centuries, there is no collection of Middle English fables, but a handful of them appeared as part of other works (Chaucer again). Their coarse and satirical tone must have made them as unpopular with the clergy as the fabliaux.

## Ballads

**Ballads** are orally transmitted narrative poems often dealing with a tragic or violent subject matter, and involving international folk song themes, historical or semi-historical events, and popular heroes (like Robin Hood) who stand up for the oppressed or represent the downtrodden.<sup>26</sup>

It is difficult to date the ballads since they are the product of an oral tradition. We have only 14 ballads written before 1600, but we know that ballads existed in the 14th century and were popular in the 15th century.

The most impressive ones deal with a single situation involving revenge, or jealousy, or a return from the grave, or simply the finality of loss.

In a ballad the personality of the narrator is suppressed; it tells a story dramatically, in the form of a monologue or a dialogue, by moving from one incident to the next without transition or comment. Repetitions are often used to create an incantatory effect.

Some well-known titles are 'Lord Randall' -

"O where hae ye been, Lord Randal, my son?  
O where hae ye been, my handsome young man?"  
"I hae been to the wild wood; mother, make my bed soon,  
For I'm weary wi hunting, and fain wald lie down." -

'The Unquiet Grave' -

Cold blows the wind to my true love,  
And gently drops the rain,  
I never had but one sweetheart,  
And in greenwood she lies slain,  
And in greenwood she lies slain. -

'The Three Ravens' -

There were three ravens sat on a tree,  
Downe a downe, hay downe, hay downe  
There were three ravens sat on a tree,  
With a downe  
There were three ravens sat on a tree,

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<sup>26</sup>

See <http://www.litencyc.com/php/sttopics.php?rec=true&UID=1214>

They were as blacke as they might be.  
With a downe derrie, derrie, derrie, downe, downe

Ballads are still sung today, by Pete Seeger or Joan Baez, and the genre is still alive – think of Bob Dylan, or U2.

The five types of narrative poetry (didactic poetry, the romance, the fabliau, the fable and the ballad) discussed so far attest to the diversification of the genre which took place in the Middle English period. We are now going to see that a similar diversification occurred in the field of lyrical poetry.

#### 4. Middle English lyrical poetry

Lyrical poems were originally short poems meant to be sung; they are not narrative poems: their prime purpose is not to tell a story. The lyrical poem expresses in a personal manner the feelings and moods of an individual speaker — an I-persona who is not necessarily the author — and usually focuses on the subject of love for a woman (secular) or for God (religious).

In the Anglo-Saxon period there was no trace of truly lyrical poetry, but there was a meditative and elegiac strain in such poems as *The Wanderer* or *The Seafarer*, or a love element in *The Wife's Lament* or *The Husband's Message* — all of which were first of all narrative poems. By contrast, in the Middle English period there are some truly secular and religious lyrics.

#### **Secular lyrics**

The first secular lyrics consist of casually preserved scraps, or little pieces of a few lines scribbled by a bored cleric in the margin or on a blank leaf of a manuscript dealing with something quite different. For example:

I am of Ireland  
And from the holy land  
Of Ireland  
Good Sir, I pray thee  
For holy charity  
Come and dance with me  
In Ireland.

It is only well into the 13th century that we find any significant number of English lyrics, but their quality makes it clear that a tradition of lyrical poetry had by that time emerged, and was well-established.

**The English Love Song** is very different from the aristocratic tradition of *chanson courtoise*, in which love is courtly love — i.e., the devotion of the ‘I’ to a woman who is out of reach. In the latter case the relation is that of vassal to lord, the lover is enlisted in the service of love: he expects the lady to be haughty and capricious; he endures all kinds of hardships and suffers in the hope of making himself worthy of her. Love is thus like a cult: the poet praises the beauty, the goodness and the spiritual excellence of the woman, whom he considers as a kind of divinity. The poet analyzes his own emotions, theorizes about the causes and effects of love and finds enjoyment in the very suffering which he endures.

The popular love song (to be found in France as well as in England) is different in that it is rooted in real life. Here, love is a natural feeling that develops between two young people. Love to them is not a cult to a divinity which is out of reach. The English love songs are frank and outspoken, as in *Alison* in which the poet describes the young girl's fair hair, black eyes, etc, and his only fear is that someone else might take her away from him:

Between March and April,  
    When sprays begin to spring,  
The little bird in bird-song  
    Delights and longs to sing.  
And lost in love, I cling  
    To the fairest, sweetest thing.  
Blisses may she bring  
    To me, her bonded one!

Grace and glorious luck are mine,  
And sure, their sending is divine;  
My love has left all womankind,  
And lights on Alison.

Bright hair and body slender,  
    Tawny eyebrows sweet;  
Her eyes of black show tender  
    When my own they meet.  
Unless she takes me straight  
    To be her own true mate,  
I shall be felled by Fate,  
    My earthly life fordone.

Grace and glorious luck, etc.

The sentiments in these poems are thus different from the French variety, both in nature and in tone. They express a sense of wonder at the beauty of the experience.

Another important difference with the *chanson courtoise* and courtly literature in general is that the love song is associated with spring — a season which tends to be revered more in the northern than in the southern countries. This hailing of spring is an expression of relief and rejoicing at the return of life in nature; and love is associated with spring because in man's life love also appears as a revival or a renewal of life. In the English love songs the announcers of spring are usually the nightingale and the cuckoo bird.

Thus, the Middle English period witnesses an expansion in the scope of its poetry, which reflects an increasing number of aspects of the life and thought of the time; a whole range of attitudes is now represented, which includes the courtly love to be found in the romances, but also the fresh and natural approach to love typifying the English love song; there are even political or social lyrics, expressing feelings of indignation arising from particular concrete situations. Moreover, there is a new diversification between the aristocratic and the more popular narrative poetry (the romance as against the *fabliau*) — whereas in the Anglo-Saxon period only the gnomic verses were not aristocratic in origin.

### **Religious lyrics**

Not surprisingly, the greatest number of surviving lyrics are religious poems expressing love not for a woman but for God. These lyrics range from the simply moral to the devotional and even the mystical.

There are many lyrics written in praise of the Virgin or appealing to her as a link between God and mankind, or else related to various episodes of her life (as, for example, the Annunciation).

There are also dramatic lyrics, in the form of a monologue or a dialogue (between the Virgin and her child, Christ). Some of them are addressed to Christ; these can be songs of praise, or appeals to him for help or salvation.

## **5. The alliterative revival (14th century)**

As we know, the French influence in the Middle English period was responsible for a shift from the Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse to the octosyllabic rhyming couplet of



French origin. This shift was never complete, however, in as much as the alliterative verse smouldered on to re-emerge in the 14th century in a number of poems which make up the movement known as the alliterative revival.

This revival of the Anglo-Saxon alliterative line occurred mostly in the north and northwest of England. This concerns a group of four poems, *Pearl*, *Patience*, *Cleanness*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (see above). These four poems were found in the same manuscript and were probably written by the same anonymous hand (often called the 'Pearl-poet').

Among the poems of the alliterative revival, there are also many poems expressing protest — religious, but also moral, social, and political protest. In most of these the criticism is directed against the government for tolerating too many abuses. Like most forms of political opposition, this criticism came from people who did not belong to the classes exercising power. It is therefore not surprising that these poems should be written in alliterative verse and not in the more fashionable French line used at the court. Among these poems of religious and social protest, *Piers Plowman* is the most famous.

### **The 'Pearl poet'**

*Pearl* is a narrative poem as well as an elegy<sup>27</sup> in the form of a dream allegory.<sup>28</sup> The poet recalls how a lovely pearl slipped from his hand into the grass and was lost. In his grief, he often visits the spot: one morning he falls asleep and has a dream which forms the substance of the poem.

In his dream he finds himself in a land of great beauty with a bright river running by. He cannot cross the river, but sees on the other side, where the country is even more beautiful, a shining maid — whom the reader associates with the lost pearl, for this maid is dressed in white with ornaments of pearl. This maid is the child (the pearl) that the poet had lost; and he is speechless with wonder and fear. She speaks to him, however, and explains her position in the New Jerusalem. The poet attempts to cross the river — the river of death of course — but she warns him that ever since Adam's Fall the river has only been crossed in death. He grieves at this, but is told to be patient and to resign himself to God's will and mercy. She then tells him about the means of salvation; she

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<sup>27</sup> A sad poem written in praise of a dead person, or expressing regret or nostalgia for something belonging to the past.

<sup>28</sup> An allegory is the representation of an abstraction through something concrete, as for example when vices or virtues are embodied by characters; see the section on morality plays. See <http://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=24>

answers his questions, and finally he sees her in a procession of virgin brides of Christ, led by the Lamb. In an ecstasy of joy and longing the poet attempts to cross the river and wakes up, filled with a new spiritual strength and religious fervour.

*Pearl* stands alone in Middle English religious poetry for its sustained emotional quality and for its technical mastery of versification. It is intense in mood, tone, and emotional effect.

*Patience* and *Purity* (or *Cleanness*), which discuss the moral virtues evoked in the titles and illustrate them by telling appropriate biblical stories, lack the special kind of sensibility which makes *Pearl* so impressive. These allegorical and narrative poems try to encourage moral and religious fervour, at a time when there was much corruption in Church, government and court. (Remember the similar efforts attempted in prose by Wycliffe.)

### ***Piers Plowman***

This is a narrative poem expressing religious, social and moral protest, once again in the form of a dream allegory. Its author is probably William Langland, but the attribution is uncertain. It was written by a deeply religious mind who was indignant at the vices of a society which is Christian only in name — again, Wycliffe's criticism of the Church springs to mind.

The poet first gives a satirical picture of the actual world; then, in a dream, he has a vision of the world as it would be if the teachings of the gospels were truly practised. The poem is thus a work of edification — or moral instruction — which shows a powerful imagination and is full of realistic and vivid paintings of characters and scenes. It is characterized by its trenchant satire, and by its deep moral earnestness. Like Wycliffe, the author is convinced of the need for a reform of the clergy; yet he does not follow Wycliffe in his innovations. While Wycliffe anticipated protestantism since he insisted on an individual interpretation of the Bible and attacked devotion to the saints and the use of indulgences, Langland simply demanded a return to the true spirit of the gospels: he also condemned the use of indulgences, but did not want any innovations in doctrine.

The prologue describes how the poet fell asleep on a hill on a May morning, and saw, in a dream, 'a fair field full of folk' (i.e., a picture of human society) — with ploughmen, hermits, merchants, jesters, beggars, pilgrims and friars, etc, each going about his business, and the list closes with the pardoner selling indulgences, and

negligent priests deserting their flocks for an easy life of pleasure in London. Here are two excerpts from the prologue:

In a summer season, when soft was the sunlight,  
I shook on some shreds of shepherd clothing  
And habited like a hermit, but not a holy one,  
Went wide in this world, watching for wonders.  
But on a May morning, on a Malvern hilltop,  
A marvel befell me, as might a fairy-tale.  
I was weary and far-wandered and went to rest myself  
On a broadish bank by a running brook,  
And as I lay leaning and looking in the water  
I slipped into a slumber, it slid away so merrily.  
[...]  
A fair field full of folk found I there between them,  
Of all manner of men, the meaner and the richer,  
Working and wandering, as the world asks of them.  
Some were putting out to plough, had little play-time,  
In setting and sowing, sweated at their labour,  
Winning wealth that the worthless wasted in their gluttony.  
Some pranked themselves in pride, preciously apparelled,  
Coming under colour of costly clothing.  
To prayer and to penance many put themselves,  
All for the love of our Lord living austerely,  
In hope they might have their happiness in heaven,  
Such as anchorites and hermits who hold to their cells,  
And do not covet to go off gadding round the country  
For bodily liking of a lecherous livelihood.  
And some chose business, with better achievement,  
For it seems to our sight that such are successful.

The vision then develops into an allegorical interpretation of life. A lady named Holy Church appears to him amid this disorder and tells the poet that the crowd is busy with things of the earth rather than things of Heaven, that man's chief duty is to seek Truth, to be full of charity and love for the poor, that faith without charity is worth nothing, that only love and charity lead to heaven. When the poet asks how he will recognize the false or the untrue, the poem develops into a lively allegory of Lady Meed<sup>29</sup> and her misdoings: she tries her tricks on the King and on members of the clergy, recommending to them the acceptance of bribes. This naturally leads the author to present a harsh criticism of both the socio-political and the religious worlds.

A second dream is devoted to an allegorical presentation of the seven deadly sins pictured as real people who eventually come to repent the sins they have illustrated. This

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<sup>29</sup> An archaic word for recompense, reward. (Lady Meed is the antithesis of the Holy Church: she stands for attachment to worldly goods.)

is the liveliest part of the poem. Pride, Gluttony, Sloth, Lust, Greed, Anger, Covetousness are thus personified and shown committing the sins they stand for, before they actually repent. The most striking is perhaps the picture of Gluttony in the tavern where he stops on his way to church. This involves the description of a medieval tavern, and of Gluttony drinking with his friends and only repenting when he awakes two days later with a hangover.

When the crowd of sinners, now repentant, wish to set out for the sanctuary of Truth, no one knows the road to be taken. Piers, the ploughman who for fifty years has served truth by working hard and who, helped by Conscience and Good Sense, has learnt the way, tells them that he will act as a guide to the company but only after he has ploughed his field. So he directs everybody to hard work, and those who refuse are forced in the end by Hunger. Truth eventually sends a pardon for all — though lawyers and merchants are eligible only with reservations (because they are not always honest in their transactions). The dreamer then wakes up and passionately remarks on the superiority of good works over indulgences as a means of pardon (i.e., as release from punishment for an offence).

To sum up, *Piers Plowman* shows a remarkable treatment of the dream allegory with its alternation of bitter satire and of vivid realistic descriptions of contemporary life in a time of growing corruption and materialism among the rich, and of growing suffering among the poor — 14th century people had to suffer the Black Death as well as heavy taxes and hardships of all kinds during the Hundred Year War (1338-1453); this contributed to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

Although the poem is violent in its criticism of both Church and State, *Piers Plowman* is not a revolutionary poem in the usual sense, for it does not advocate changes in the structures of society: it only demands that its various ranks and professions should conform to the true teaching of Christ. It is the work of a religious idealist who is sincerely distressed by the social and moral condition of England and who tries to create a large and cumulative vision of what is wrong in society, and of how this might be redressed.

## 6. Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400)

Among all the 14th-century poets he is by and large the most 'modern' — as opposed to someone like Langland who was writing in the Anglo-Saxon tradition (he used a Saxon idiom and the alliterative verse). Chaucer was strongly influenced by what happened on

the continent (notably in France and Italy, where the Renaissance was already beginning) and he marks a brilliant culmination of Middle English literature.

Chaucer is quite a phenomenon: he had metrical craftsmanship (i.e., the ability to handle English verse with subtlety and flexibility), and he gave his poetry such a polish that he definitely turned English into a literary language. Moreover, he had a European consciousness: he was aware of what was going on in Europe in the field of literature and at the same time he had an English national consciousness that allowed him to present the English scene as it had never been presented before. He had a natural curiosity that led him to observe his contemporaries and to deal with them in his work with a combination of sympathy, irony and amusement. Also, he had the good fortune of knowing people in all ranks of society.

Chaucer was the son of a London wine merchant; yet he was trained in courtly and diplomatic life, so that he was associated with people at the court and in government circles. His visits to France and Italy brought him into contact with French and Italian men of letters.

The combination of genius and the circumstances of his life made him the most accomplished, as well as the most universally appealing, of medieval English writers. The gradual process of recovery and refinement of the language after the impact of the French influence was now complete. It was a fortunate accident of history that the man who had such technical gifts for handling the language also had a remarkable largeness of view, a wide knowledge and experience of life, and that he felt such sympathy towards his fellow beings. All this enabled him, in the later part of his career, to embody in *The Canterbury Tales* his great secular vision of his fellow men. He used all the intellectual and imaginative resources of the Middle Ages: not, as Dante did in his *Divine Comedy*, to present a concrete embodiment of the moral and theological universe of the Middle Ages, but to bring to life, with vividness and cunning, the psychological and social world of the time. To some extent, this picture turns out to be universal, so that it also appears to represent our own age, as indeed any other age.

It is convenient — though not always exactly accurate — to divide Chaucer's career into three phases and to distinguish between his French, his Italian, and his English periods.

1. The French period. Chaucer first wrote under the influence of French poetry: he knew about the *Roman de la Rose*, a 13th-century allegorical love romance written by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung; so that very early on he absorbed the courtly

love tradition of the French romance. He translated part of the *Roman de la Rose* into English (in eight-syllable rhymed couplets), under the title of *Romaunt of the Rose*. Characteristically for medieval love poetry, the story is in the form of a dream; the poet visits the garden of Mirth, where he finds allegorical figures, including the God of Love, dancing. He sees the reflection in a clear spring of a rose-bud, which he falls in love with and desires to pick. His attempts to do so are assisted or frustrated by more allegorical figures: Bialacoil (Welcome, from the French 'Bel Accueil') is his friend, but Shame and Danger are his enemies. The lover is made the servant of the God of Love who helps him, but Jealousy builds a castle round the rose-tree and shuts him out. The significance of the allegory is that possession of the bud represents possession of the lady, and the figures that surround it are aspects of herself or representatives of her family. The poem is a classic statement of romantic love in symbolic terms.

It is also in this period that Chaucer wrote *The Book of the Duchess* (1369), which shows the influence of the French poets Machault and Froissart and is again written in 8-syllable rhymed couplets. It is an elegy in the dream allegory tradition: in a dream, the poet sees 'a man in black' in a wood; and this man tells him about his courtship of a beautiful lady. He describes her beauty, her gentle ways, her soft speech and her goodness, until the poem ends on the revelation that his present mourning is for her death.

2. The Italian period. Chaucer made two journeys to Italy where he came under the influence of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, but also under that of Boccaccio. So he built on the old French pattern of allegorical love visions, adding new material from Italy. In particular, he added a new seriousness and flexibility to his poetry. For example, *The House of Fame* and *The Parliament of Fowls* were both written in the dream allegory tradition, but Chaucer imposes his own personality and sense of humour even though there are echoes of Dante's high seriousness.

It is during this period that he wrote his first masterpiece, *Troilus and Criseyde* (between 1372 and 1386). It is a poem of tragic love set in Ancient times, based on a legend of obscure origins. The poem is over 8000 lines, in the 7-line stanzas known as rhyme-royal. It is based on the Italian *Il Filostrato*, by Boccaccio, but greatly lengthened and changed in spirit. The story is that of Troilus's love for Cressida, his winning her love, and her eventual betrayal and desertion for the Greek Diomedes. By giving Cressida a psychological complexity which she did not have in Boccaccio's work, Chaucer turned her into the first truly complex heroine in European literature (if we disregard some

works in ancient drama); and this, without losing the essential qualities of medieval romance or abandoning the conventions of courtly love.

3. The English period. This is when he wrote his greatest work, *The Canterbury Tales*, a poem unfortunately left unfinished. In this work Chaucer drew the various strands of his genius together. After he had learned all he could from his French and Italian models, and after he had gained the complete mastery of his art, he now stood on his own feet.

*The Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories in verse, told by pilgrims drawn from every class of the English society of his time. To pass the time on their journey from London to Canterbury, where they go on a pilgrimage to offer their devotions at the shrine of Thomas à Becket,<sup>30</sup> the travellers tell tales drawn from literary or folk sources that often seem appropriate to the social character and status of the teller.

Chaucer had planned to have two stories by each of the pilgrims on the way to Canterbury, and then another two on the way back to London. But the whole scheme was far from complete by the time of his death – or he had decided not to conclude. The real purpose of the plan was to combine his direct observation of men and life with his literary knowledge, and this he did very well. The scheme was thus not so much a literary form in itself, as a device for giving new life to several literary traditions and forms.

This device, which consisted in grouping tales by different people, was known in early European medieval literature, and it was practised in Chaucer's time by Boccaccio in his *Decameron* (1349-51; though this is a prose work), but Chaucer's work is unique in the way it individualizes the narrators, and because of the vivid sense he gives of the whole contemporary scene of his time. On the other hand we do not know for sure whether Chaucer had read the *Decameron* when he wrote his *Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer brings together at an inn representatives of every class in the England of his day (excluding the extremes of richness and poverty). The group includes a knight, a squire and his son, professional men like the doctor and the lawyer, a shipman, various representatives of religious and mendicant orders (such as a prioress, a monk, an honest parson, a pardoner who sells indulgences), and also a farmer, a miller, a London cook, a woman from Bath and several craftsmen. Each pilgrim is at once a fully realized

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas à Becket (1118-1170) was a prelate, and the chancellor to King Henry II, who wanted him to support his claim to control the Church; he became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162, and was murdered in the Cathedral of that city following his opposition to the King's attempts to control the clergy. He was canonized three years later.

individual and also a representative of his or her class or profession. They are on holiday, so that they are more relaxed and self-revealing than they might otherwise be: their normal habits of thought, their prejudices and their professional biases, their everyday beliefs all show in their conversation and behaviour.

There is a Prologue to the work, which describes the pilgrims one by one and takes up the details that would strike the eye of a fellow traveller. Yet Chaucer is often ironic in his apparently naive presentation of his characters. The description of the prioress is a good example: it seems to result from an innocent observation of the prioress, until we become aware that the details add up to compose an amusing picture of a nun whose real interest in life is to affect genteel behaviour — which is incompatible with the status of a nun, who is supposed to withdraw from the world. Here are excerpts from the Prologue:

When in April the sweet showers fall  
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all  
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power  
As brings about the engendering of the flower,  
When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath  
Exhales an air in every grove and heath  
Upon the tender shoots, and the young sun  
His half-course in the sign of the *Ram* has run,  
And the small fowl are making melody  
That sleep away the night with open eye  
(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)  
Then people long to go on pilgrimages  
And palmers long to seek the stranger strands  
Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,  
And specially, from every shire's end  
Of England, down to Canterbury they wend  
To seek the holy blissful martyr, quick  
To give his help to them when they were sick.  
[...]

There also was a *Nun*, a Prioress,  
Her way of smiling very simple and coy.  
Her greatest oath was only 'By St Loy!'  
And she was known as Madame Eglantyne.  
And well she sang a service, with a fine  
Intoning through her nose, as was most seemly,  
And she spoke daintily in French, extremely,  
After the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe;  
French in the Paris style she did not know.  
At meat her manners were well taught withal;  
No morsel from her lips did she let fall,  
Nor dipped her fingers in the sauce too deep;  
But she could carry a morsel up and keep  
The smallest drop from falling in her breast.  
For courtliness she had a special zest,  
And she would wipe her upper lip so clean



That not a trace of grease was to be seen  
 Upon the cup when she had drunk; to eat,  
 She reached a hand sedately for the meat.  
 She certainly was very entertaining,  
 Pleasant and friendly in her ways, and straining  
 To counterfeit a courtly kind of grace,  
 A stately bearing fitted to her place,  
 And to seem dignified in all her dealings.  
 As for her sympathies and tender feelings,  
 She was so charitably solicitous  
 She used to weep if she but saw a mouse  
 Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bleeding.  
 And she had little dogs she would be feeding  
 With roasted flesh, or milk, or fine white bread.  
 And bitterly she wept if one were dead  
 Or someone took a stick and made it smart;  
 She was all sentiment and tender heart.  
 Her veil was gathered in a seemly way,  
 Her nose was elegant, her eyes glass-grey;  
 Her mouth was very small, but soft and red,  
 Her forehead, certainly, was fair of spread,  
 Almost a span across the brows, I own;  
 She was indeed by no means undergrown.  
 Her cloak, I noticed, had a graceful charm.  
 She wore a coral trinket on her arm,  
 A set of beads, the gaudies tricked in green,  
 Whence hung a golden brooch of brightest sheen  
 On which there first was graven a crowned A,  
 And lower, *Amor vincit omnia*.

Another extremely enjoyable character is the Wife of Bath. By the time she tells her story we know her as a woman of very strong opinions who is collecting husbands (she has had five so far, one after the other) and firmly believes in the need to manage them strictly. In her story, one of King Arthur's knights must give within a year the correct answer to the question, 'What do women love most?', in order to save his life. An ugly old witch knows the answer ('To rule') and agrees to tell him if he marries her. At last he agrees, and in their nuptial bed we are treated to the Celtic motif of shape-shifting, since the old hag becomes a beautiful young girl.

Only the knight, the parson and the plowman are presented almost as ideal figures, though it is difficult to decide whether Chaucer is not being ironical, particularly in the case of the knight. Their portraits seem to be nostalgic idealizations, which did not really have a model in reality. The knight originally represented the highest ideal of chivalry and courtesy; the parson, genuine Christian behaviour; and the plowman honest hard work. But chivalry in Chaucer's time was passing out — England was governed by a corrupt and selfish clique (these were the last years of Edward III's reign, and the

beginning of Richard II's) — and the Church was also highly corrupt, as Wycliffe and Langland had pointed out. As to the hard-working and obedient plowman, he may well have ceased to exist after the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

*The Canterbury Tales* can be presented as an anthology of medieval literature, as Chaucer knew how to fuse all traditions and genres into one and the same work, which brought medieval literature to a climax.

Every form of poetry is represented: the courtly romance and, under the form of parody, the more popular type of romance. There is a Breton lay, which is set in Brittany, deals with the fidelity of true lovers, and includes a supernatural or marvellous element. There is a retelling of a classical legend, as in *The Physician's Tale* where a character called Virginius kills his daughter to save her honour. There is a folk tale — *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. Then the coarser type of story is represented by the fabliaux of the miller, of the merchant and of others. There are also many religious types of poetry, like Saints' legends (the second 'Nun's Tale'), or the 'Pardoner's Tale' (which is an *exemplum* — i.e., a story with which preachers adorned their sermons to point to a moral). Finally, there is a truly magnificent example of the fable (in which the protagonists are animals) with the story of *Chantecleer and Dame Pertelot*; and there are examples of the short lyric in the 'envoy' of the *Clerk's Tale* and the 'Invocation to Mary' at the beginning of the *Second Nun's Tale*.

With Chaucer, the English language and English medieval literature grew to full maturity. Yet his followers lacked both his technical brilliance and his breadth of vision. Not until Shakespeare would there again be an English author combining technique and insight so masterfully.

## 7. Chaucer's epigones

They are neither famous nor very interesting. John Gower (1327-1408) is the one who most deserves a mention. Gower wrote in Latin as well as in English and in French, which is evidence of the fact that the claims of Latin were still strong at the time.

Naturally, Gower suffers from comparison with Chaucer, as one tends to prefer Chaucer's humanity and humour to the unrelieved earnestness of Gower's works, which are narrowly didactic, moralistic and conservative. In *Confessio Amantis* (1386-90) he wrote, in English, a collection of tales about courtly love, in which he tries to be less didactic than in his other work. Yet even when he writes about love he tends to be

mostly a moralist and a preacher, who tries to make his teaching more pleasant by sprinkling it with tales and anecdotes. In *Confessio Amantis* the poet makes confession to Genius, priest of Venus (the goddess of love), and Genius tells him exemplary stories of the Seven Deadly Sins and their remedy. In the end the poet is dismissed from the court of Venus as being too old for love. The tales are set in a framework, like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, though in fact Gower was not a poet by temperament, but simply an earnest man alarmed at the way the world was going. He was in favour of reform but within the established order, and the Peasants' revolt filled him with horror. His concerns are similar to those of Langland in *Piers Plowman*, but Langland is moral in a more passionate and personal way and is more deeply concerned with the religious, but also the social and economic, problems of the time.

The combination in Gower of courtly love with didacticism or ethical moralizing anticipates a characteristic combination in the 15th century — which, unlike the 14th, was not a great period for poetry.

## 8. Drama

### **The origins of drama**

In the earlier stages of civilization drama was linked with religious rituals and with Saturnalian folk celebrations and seasonal festivals (at mid-winter or Christmas, in the spring and high summer) which were accompanied by appropriate symbolic actions such as dancing and semi-dramatic performances. These had survived in ritual games and play acting, which would develop into the genre known as 'May-Games'. Seasonal festivals had some influence on the early liturgical drama in England.

A form of drama was to be found within the ecclesiastical liturgy, already before the Norman conquest. English drama is thus *not* a continuation of classical (Greek and Roman) drama, which had come to an end with the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity. Like Dutch and German drama, it arose out of the performance of the Mass and other important religious ceremonies and rituals held all through the year. Indeed the religious service (the Mass) is itself already dramatic, and all the important moments or episodes in the life of Christ, from his birth at Christmas to his death and resurrection at Easter, lend themselves to dramatisation or dramatic illustrations, which will include elements from seasonal celebrations.

The following stages can be distinguished in the emergence of drama. Drama first began within the church itself with Latin antiphonal chanting between the priest and

the choir, or between two sections of the choir. This gradually gave way to a more elaborate acting out of a scene between two characters or a set of characters. These dramatic developments were called ‘tropes’, and represent the beginnings of medieval drama in England (in Latin, in the 12th century). Then the elaboration of these episodes from Christ's life made it difficult to confine the performance in the choir; so it extended down the nave. Finally, partly because of a lack of space, people moved out of the church altogether — the performance was held first in the church precincts, and then on the marketplace or in a conveniently situated meadow (i.e., in a public place located outside the church). Another reason for moving out of the church was that they sometimes had to call on outsiders to help in the performance. Moreover, some more realistic and humorous elements, sometimes verging on the vulgar, crept in; for example, there is a text in which Mary Magdalene is shown with her lover, singing a profane song and buying cosmetics, before she gets converted and exchanges her cosmetics for ointments! Such incidents were of course considered inappropriate to the solemn rituals of the church.

Other changes occurred when the acting took place outside the church: the vernacular ousted Latin, and the story moved away from the liturgy to make free use of the whole range of sacred history, from the Creation to the Last Judgement, and including the lives of Saints.

### **Miracles or Mystery plays**

Once they were performed in the open, English plays, called Miracles or Mystery Plays, were less closely connected to the liturgy, though they were still religious in subject matter. The common people took an increasing part in the performances, until by the 14th century they were in the hands of corporations (i.e., the trade guilds of the towns), so that they were infused with realistic and worldly elements about which the Church felt uneasy — even though the subject and the predominant features remained Christian in inspiration. The subjects of the Miracle plays are various: the disobedience of Adam and Eve; Noah and the great Flood; Abraham and Isaac; events in the life of Christ; and so on.

These Miracles or Mystery plays began in the 12th century and developed rapidly in the 13th; there are records of cycles of mystery plays in several regions of England during the 14th and 15th centuries — they are divided into four main groups, according

to the city where they were acted: Chester, Coventry, York, and Wakefield. Here is a short extract from *Noah's Flood* in the Chester plays:

God:       Seven days are yet coming  
              For you to gather and bring  
              Those after my liking  
              When mankind I annoy.  
              Forty days and forty nights  
              Rain shall fall for their unrights  
              And those I have made through my might  
              Now think I to destroy.

Noah:       Lord, at your bidding I am true  
              Since grace is only in you,  
              As you ask I will do.  
              For gracious I you find.

Once again, although the Miracles were serious and religious in intention, English comedy was born in them; and, in a play like this one, however serious the main story might be, neither actors nor audience could resist the temptation to enjoy the humorous possibilities of a situation such as the one in which a great deal of persuasion is needed to make Noah's wife go on board the Ark.

### **The Morality play**

The early 15th century (around 1400) saw the emergence of another medieval dramatic form, called the Morality play, which developed throughout the century.

The Morality play differs from Miracle plays in that, while the latter dramatized well-known episodes from the Bible and from the lives of saints, the former dramatized the life of man by personifying the forces of good and evil, such as the seven deadly sins and their corresponding virtues, or some representative crisis in the life of man such as his encounter with death.

Thus the characters in these plays were not people (such as Adam and Eve or Noah); they were virtues (such as Truth) or bad qualities (such as Greed or Revenge) which walked and talked. The Morality plays deal with the personifications of abstract qualities or with generalized classes, such as Everyman, King, or Bishop. They are still religious but no longer draw on Biblical stories (as in the Miracle play). Its method is allegorical: a character stands for an abstract quality or vice (i.e., for a sin or a virtue).

The themes and subjects of the Morality play are the summons of death, the conflict of vices and virtues for supremacy in the soul of man, the question of man's ultimate

fate: his salvation or damnation. This kind of play thus centres on man's conduct of life as it affects his salvation. In other words, the morality play teaches a lesson about right living (as viewed from the perspective of the Church); it preaches a sermon in dramatic form. Yet here too humour is pervasive.

The Morality play thus presents some lesson or warning allegorically, by means of abstract characters or generalized types, and this lesson concerns man's spiritual good (i.e., his salvation). It is a typically medieval expression in that its method is allegorical; its usual subject matter, like the seven deadly sins for example, was a commonplace theme in medieval art and literature.

The 15th century, when the Morality play coexisted side by side with the Miracle plays, was the period of its fullest development.

The best-known example of a Morality play is *Everyman* — which parallels the Dutch *Elckerlijck* and the German *Jedermann*. The play confines itself to the hour in which Everyman, after leading a heedless and sinful life, receives the summons of death. He is told by a messenger that he must go on a long journey (i.e., he must die). He pleads in vain for a delay, and only has the consolation that he can ask his more intimate friends to accompany him. But he finds that his friends Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin and Worldly Goods cannot or will not go with him into the next world. Only Good Deeds, with whom he has had very little to do during his life, finally agrees to descend with him into the grave. He says:

Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide,  
In thy most need to be by thy side.

The lesson is obvious: only the good deeds one performs during one's life will decide of one's salvation.

## **May-games**

Among the surviving forms of seasonal festivals distinct from liturgical drama we find May-games, developing more and more elaborate stories. The French *Jeu de Robin et de Marion* was not only translated but so thoroughly adapted to the English context that the main character became the ballad hero Robin Hood, and his girl was Maid Marian. The influence of May games can be felt in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*.

## The interlude

Towards the end of the 15th century (i.e., in the next period, which is called the Renaissance) another type of play was developed, called the interlude. As the word suggests, this was a short dramatic entertainment, performed either in banqueting halls (between courses of a meal) or in the market place or village green, originally between the acts of another play. Such plays were easy to produce so amateur performers would take them on tour. The function of such theatre seems to have been mainly entertainment. It is in fact a secular Morality play, which is characterized by its realistic and comic elements, and above all by the new humanistic spirit of the Renaissance which replaces the medieval religious approach. The term actually covers a variety of plays whose subject matter ranges from farce to something closer to the spirit of the Morality play. In other words, interludes and moralities are not always easily distinguishable. John Heywood (1497-1580) is one of the main representatives of this genre (see next section).

## 9. Poetry in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century

At the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century it was clear that none of Chaucer's followers had his technical brilliance, his imagination or his understanding of human nature, and there was no one who could combine the courtly, the bourgeois and the folk traditions as Chaucer had done. In England the age was marked by a progressive exhaustion or dying out of earlier, medieval modes of writing.

The tradition of courtly poetry had worked itself out. It seems that narrative poetry (the romance) and lyrical poetry were superseded by allegory and by the didacticism of someone like Gower. With the decline of feudalism and the rise of a realistic merchant class, there was no new source of idealism to revivify the romance tradition. So the courtly tradition came to an end, even though there was a brief revival of the genre with Malory at the end of the century — but, significantly, his *Morte d'Arthur* (1469-70) was written in prose (which is to be related to the introduction of the printing press).

In the 15th century there were also satirical, topical and political verses of little literary interest, as well as many didactic, moralistic and religious writings in verse. But there is no great work of poetry.

John Lydgate (?1373-?1450) is quite representative of the period. His interests are heavily didactic and his versification is not subtle, and yet he contributed something both to the themes of English literature and to the vocabulary of the English language. Indeed he introduced and emphasized the theme of Death the Leveller, who addresses all classes of men, from Pope, emperor, cardinal, king, down the scale to the labourer, the child, the hermit. This is a theme of great significance in literature and art of the period, and it emphasizes the grim moral of a common mortality (which has of course been an aspect of the human condition in all ages). Lydgate added words to the English vocabulary (mostly words of Latin or French origin such as inexcusable, tolerance, credulity, adolescence, etc.).

In Scotland, however, the 15<sup>th</sup> century saw the flowering of the “Makars” tradition, which combined medieval and Renaissance elements in a way that is similar to Chaucer. The best known of these poets is probably William Dunbar (1456?-1513?), who lived in the university town of St Andrews and in the city of Edinburgh, but also traveled on the continent. His most famous poem is the “Lament for the Makaris”, with its Latin motto that was pervasive in the middle ages: *Timor mortis conturbat me* – fear of death makes my body ache. Here are the first two stanzas (there are 25 altogether):

I that in heill wes and gladnes,  
Am trublit now with gret seiknes,  
And feblit with infermite;  
Timor mortis conturbat me.

Our plesance heir is all vane glory,  
This fals world is bot transitory,  
The flesche is brukle, the Fend is sle;  
Timor mortis conturbat me.

## 10. Prose in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century

### a. Religious prose

Margery Kempe's spiritual biography is often called the first autobiography in English. A married woman who attempted to live a life devoted to Christ, Margery Kempe (c1373 - after 1438)<sup>31</sup> sought official Church recognition for her status as a

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<sup>31</sup> See <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=5093>.



spiritual woman and mystic, while continuing to live and travel in the secular world. She experienced intense emotional encounters with Christ, which have at times a strikingly homely quality. Not only is Christ the most handsome man that can ever be seen but he most willingly shares her bed. Her *Book*, dictated by her to a scribe, records these visions as well as her travels in Europe and pilgrimages (to Jerusalem and Santiago). Her particular spiritual trial, according to her *Book*, was to be misrepresented, persecuted, and rejected by many of her clerical and lay peers. The recording of her spiritual life, despite severe difficulties and her own illiteracy, became a symbolic act in itself, representing both her claim to spiritual status and evidence of her special relationship with God. Rich in detail about the people and places Margery encountered, the *Book* is a fascinating record of life in turbulent early 15th century England.

## **b. Secular prose**

The growth of the reading public, which now included the merchant class, is also shown by the use of prose for works which would earlier have been written in verse; for example, we have already seen that this is the time of the beginnings of the **prose romance** (translated from the French). *La Morte D'Arthur* (1469-70) is a collection of late versions of the legends of King Arthur, translated from the French by Sir Thomas Malory. It was among the earliest books in English to have been printed (by Caxton, in 1485). The finest part is the last four books, comprising the unlawful love of Guinevere and Lancelot and the destruction of the fellowship of the Round Table, all in keeping with the contemporary downfall of medieval England in the War of the Roses. Originally the book consisted of eight separate tales about King Arthur and his knights, but when Caxton printed the book in 1485 (after Malory's death) he joined them into one long story. One of the main subjects in these tales was the search for the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper, known as the Holy Grail. Another subject was Arthur's battles against his enemies (who are no longer Germanic invaders, but treacherous lords, which also reflects the spirit of the times). Malory's fine prose can tell a direct story well, but can also express deep feelings in musical sentences. Here is part of the book in modern form. King Arthur is badly wounded:

Then Sir Bedivere took the king on his back and so went with him to the water's edge. And when they were there, close by the bank, there came a little ship with many beautiful ladies in

it; and among them all there was a queen. And they all had black head-dresses, and all wept and cried when they saw King Arthur.

There were also **courtesy books**: ie, treatises addressed to young people to teach them how to behave — what a gentleman or a young girl should do and know. These are another proof of the growth of the landed gentry and of the rise of the middle class. Among these courtesy books one finds parental advice, or books dealing with the training for service with a nobleman, or on hawking, heraldry and hunting.

Among the many 15th-century prose works one should mention *The Paston Letters* (1422-1509), a collection of **correspondence** between members of the Paston family of Norfolk, over a period of three generations. These letters, if not exactly literary, are an early example of good, informal prose, and are therefore interesting to the historians of the language; and moreover the collection is perhaps the finest historical record of England in the Middle Ages, since they give a picture of life in England at a period which was one of the most disturbed, politically speaking, in the whole of English history (it covers the reigns of Henry VI, Edward IV, and Richard III — the period which includes the civil War of the Roses).

As announced in the section on the historical background and as is shown by the last three sections, by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the time was ripe for a deep change in sensibility.

## THE RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance is a complex West-European cultural movement which began in Italy in the 14th century and spread across Europe over the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The word ‘renaissance’ (rebirth) is to be related to the re-discovery of ancient Greece and Rome, their culture, philosophy, literature and arts, in their original forms — that is to say, not interpreted and transmitted by the medieval Christian philosophers and scholars. This re-discovery of Antiquity coincided with the economic assertion of the individual that accompanies the development of capitalist society, and led to the liberation of individual thought from the authority of the Church and from the weight of an essentially theological approach. The Renaissance made man aware of himself and of the beauty and material joys of life on earth (which the Church presented as sinful).

The Renaissance was thus marked by a craving for knowledge and discovery. In the field of learning there was a freer and more ‘critical’ approach to the classics, their philosophy and literature: this was called **New Learning** or **Humanism**, a term which indicates that ‘Man’ was again, as was the case with the Ancients, the main focus of interest, and all his potentialities were fully recognized and allowed to express themselves.

Because of its being an island England was one of the last countries to be stirred by Renaissance ideas — in the first half of the 16th century.

### 1. The Early Tudors (1485-1558)

Under the reign of Henry VII (1485-1509) literature had not yet been influenced by the new ideas. At the end of the War of the Roses, a confrontation between the two great families of York and Lancaster, writers felt a certain nostalgia for the past. As seen in the previous section, printing (a revolutionary technique in many respects) had been introduced in England by Caxton in 1476. Among the first printed works we find texts of medieval inspiration (Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (1485) marks a brief revival of the courtly tradition that had flourished in verse romances before; Caxton printed poets such as Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate — i.e., poets of the past), but also imported and

translated texts such as *Aesop's Fables* and Virgil's *Eneydos* (1490). In his preface to the *Eneydos* Caxton states the need to use linguistic forms that will be understandable to any speaker of English. Printing thus also represented a powerful impulse towards standardization of English across dialects and social registers.

Modern English literature can be said to really begin under the reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547).

## **Intellectual background and the evolution of prose**

Two important movements influenced the development of literature at the time: the New Learning or Humanism and the Reformation.

1. The first is the New Learning: i.e., the introduction and development of humanism. This involves a kind of cultural revolution, a return to the study of the pre-Christian culture of ancient Greece and Rome, viewed as something more civilized, more splendid, and more representative of the best human achievements in the fields of art and science. The movement stems from a desire to approach the original sources of classical culture — the Latin and Greek texts were studied directly — in reaction to the spirit of the Middle Ages, which were considered as an age of superstition (the 'dark ages') that blocked out the light of classical culture.

Yet the English Renaissance is at first more a matter of borrowing from Italy and France (where the Renaissance occurred earlier). Afterwards, in a second phase, the English adapted whatever they borrowed from the Continent to their own culture and tastes.

Two centres of learning contributed to the introduction of humanism in England: the court, since some Italian and French humanists came to visit the English court, while English diplomats travelled abroad and brought back what they had seen; and the universities, since English scholars also travelled abroad (to Italy and France) and got in touch with great continental humanists like Erasmus (1466-1536).<sup>32</sup>

The humanist movement gave rise to a number of didactic prose works. A well-known English humanist is Thomas Elyot (1490-1548), whose *Book of the Governor* (1531, dedicated to Henry VIII) was written in English and not in Latin. Its aim is to

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<sup>32</sup> There were two universities at the time: Oxford and Cambridge. The University of Oxford had been founded in 1133 and was almost at once an active intellectual centre (remember Wycliff in the 14<sup>th</sup> century). The University of Cambridge was founded in 1209 by a handful of tutors and students who left Oxford after a clash with the local population.

train the leaders of the nation and to educate people through the study of ancient history and philosophy; and also to refine the English language and extend English vocabulary. Elyot thus helped to create an English prose style that would be appropriate to deal with serious philosophical and cultural matters, which had so far been dealt with in Latin. (Remember that in the Middle Ages the vernacular had been used mainly for didactic and religious purposes: i.e., for the edification of ordinary people.)

Roger Ascham (1515-1568) offers a good example of the way humanism was domesticated in England. The first humanists had advocated travels abroad to see what was happening on the Continent; but the movement they initiated was now absorbed into the native culture, and Ascham's book *The Schoolmaster* (1570) is a plea for a more humane and thorough system of education, written in English for the English people. Ascham thought that education should be persuasive in its methods rather than prescriptive. In this work he condemns travels to Italy and France, which he says are places of corruption — mostly because these countries were still Roman Catholic. These journeys are no longer necessary, he says, nor is it useful to write in Latin. He thought the English people should refine *their* language and 'delatinise it'.

Under the reign of Henry VIII humanism reached a high point with Thomas More (1478-1535). He was 14 years old when Christopher Columbus discovered America (1492), and like him he was a man who definitely looked towards the future and was concerned with the expansion of man's possibilities in this world rather than with his salvation in the next — this, in spite of the fact that he was a Catholic (he died for his faith in 1535). More's concerns appear clearly in his prose work *Utopia* (1515), which was first published in Latin, for More believed, like other early humanists, that English prose at the time was not a refined enough medium to explore and express complex philosophical and cultural topics. *Utopia* was translated into English in 1551 (i.e., well after his death in 1535).

In *Utopia* More contrasts the present world with the new world which, he thought, the Renaissance would make possible. Book 1 is a description of the political, social, and economic evils of England — for example, he refers to the savagery of the laws (stealing was still punished by hanging), to nationalistic ambition (leading to selfish wars), unjust taxation, the unequal distribution of wealth and the concomitant problem of poverty. In Book 2 he takes his readers to Utopia, a land where there is no private property or money, no unemployment, no tavern brawls and no wars of aggression: it is a country where people work six hours a day and where men and women go to attend

lectures (on Greek learning!). One recognizes here the kind of welfare state that all humanistic and progressive minds have dreamed of or tried to call into being throughout the history of mankind.

However, Thomas More is different from other humanists (like Ascham, for example) in that at no time did he follow the trend towards reformed doctrine (the Reformation); he died a Catholic and a martyr in 1535 because he refused to recognize the Act of Supremacy, which aimed to establish the king (Henry VIII) as Supreme Head of the Church in England (thereby displacing the sovereignty of the Pope). He was thus found guilty of treason and executed.

As we have seen, the Renaissance really started in England under the reign of Henry VIII, with the prose works of humanists like Elyot, Ascham and More opening the way to this 'new learning'; it is also associated with a second movement, namely the Reformation. This caused the writing and publication of some other important prose works, notably translations of the Bible into English, and also the writing of the Book of Common Prayer (the prayer book of the Church of England) by Thomas Cranmer.

2. The Reformation. The Protestant Reformation did not actually take place until late in the reign of Henry VIII (1509-47), who was called 'defensor fidei'. The change at first was not a matter of doctrine but of jurisdiction. Indeed Henry VIII broke with the Pope in Rome simply because he wanted a divorce which he did not get, and so he declared himself the head of the Church of England: in 1534 the Act of Supremacy was passed, abolishing the power of the Pope in England, but there was no change in doctrine at this stage. It is only in 1535 that Henry VIII changed his views and patronized the version of the Bible known as the Tyndale and Coverdale Bible. (Pope Paul III excommunicated the King in 1538.)

Under Edward VI (1547-1553) the Protestant Reformation was well under way with the Book of Common Prayer, the English Protestant prayer book which shows the gradual changes in doctrine. It is the work of Thomas Cranmer (1487-1556), who endeavoured here to reconstitute the original liturgy, but also to suppress the intrusions of new saints as well as all the ornamental developments which the Catholics had kept adding to the original. Cranmer was Bishop of Canterbury, and had a magnificent prose style.

Under the reign of Queen Mary (1553-58) there was a return to Catholicism. There were many persecutions and hangings (notably that of Cranmer), so that many

Protestants fled into exile. (Her harsh religious policy earned Mary the nickname of 'Bloody Mary'!) The Protestants in exile came into contact with continental reformers in Geneva (Calvin among them),<sup>33</sup> so that when they came back to England under Elizabeth I they were even more ardent supporters of Protestantism than they had been when they left. These people, with their new ideas and their opposition to the church hierarchy and the privileges of the clergy, became more and more unsatisfied in time, and were one of the causes of the Puritan revolution in England in the 17th century. (The Puritans wanted more equality and democracy in the organization of the Church.)

Under Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603; i.e., in the second period of the Renaissance) England experienced a period of religious toleration, in which religious controversies (as opposed to persecutions) opposed the Anglicans and the Puritans. The Anglican Church became the official Church of England, with the monarch at its head, and from then on it has stood for the established order, as represented by the high clergy (i.e., the bishops and archbishops); whereas the Puritans and the lower clergy were more democratic and held stricter views in doctrine and matters of moral behaviour. This led to the opposition between Church (Church of England) and Chapel (dissenting protestant groups).

Two more remarks on the development of prose:

(1) A striking development in the field of prose is effected by translation works; these are (somewhat belatedly but for reasons of clarity) discussed in the part of the course on literature under Elizabeth.

(2) The strong interest in history that marked the period manifested itself in several chronicles in prose such as Hall's *Chronicle* (1542; enlarged 1548 & 1550), which covers the rivalries between the families of York and Lancaster in the War of the Roses, up to the death of Richard III, the last representative of the house of York, and the accession to the throne of Henry Tudor as Henry VII. Hall's and Holinshed's *Chronicle* are the main sources used by Shakespeare for his historical plays.

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<sup>33</sup> John Calvin (whose original name was Jean Cauvin, 1509-64), was a French theologian and leader of the Protestant Reformation in France and Switzerland, establishing the first presbyterian government in Geneva. His theological system is described in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), and is characterized by emphasis on the doctrines of predestination, the irresistibility of grace, and justification by faith.

## Poetry

### Lyrical poetry

Thomas Wyatt (1502-42) and the Earl of Surrey (1517-47) are two important lyrical poets and friends in this period.

With his short lyrics and songs for the lute, Wyatt continues the Middle English tradition of the popular love song. He thus stands in the native popular tradition, but he turns this folk tradition into conscious art. Indeed he claimed that poetry no longer needed narrative or allegorical support (as in the verse romances or in allegorical poems like *Piers Plowman*, *Pearl*, etc). The typical poem by Wyatt is a series of lyrical outbursts: i.e., an expression of personal emotions and feelings, artfully repeated and modulated with a refrain at the end of each stanza.

Consider the following poem, known as ‘The Lover Complayneth the Unkindness of his Love’:

My lute, awake! perform the last  
Labour that thou and I shall waste,  
And end that I have now begun;  
For when this song is sung and past,  
My lute, be still, for I have done.

As to be heard where ear is none,  
As lead to grave in marble stone,  
My song may pierce her heart as soon.  
Should we then sigh, or sing, or moan?  
No, no, my lute, for I have done.

The rocks do not so cruelly  
Repulse the waves continually  
As she my suit and affection,  
So that I am past remedy,  
Whereby my lute and I have done.

Proud of the spoil that thou hast got  
Of simple hearts, thorough Love's shot,  
By whom, unkind, thou hast them won,  
Think not he hath his bow forgot,  
Although my lute and I have done.

Vengeance shall fall on thy disdain,  
That makest but game on earnest pain;  
Think not alone under the sun  
Unquit to cause thy lover's plain,  
Although my lute and I have done.



Perchance thee lie withered and old,  
The winter night that are so cold,  
    Plaining in vain unto the moon:  
Thy wishes then dare not be told;  
    Care then who list, for I have done.

And then may chance thee to repent  
The time that thou hast lost and spent  
    To cause thy lover's sigh and swoon;  
Then shalt thou know beauty but lent,  
    And wish and want as I have done.

Now cease, my lute; this is the last  
Labour that thou and I shall waste,  
    And ended is that we begun;  
Now is this song both sung and past;  
    My lute, be still, for I have done.

Like other sophisticated poets, Wyatt kept the refrain of popular poetry but adapted it for his own purposes. In the following poem, the refrain of 'Forget not yet' has a mounting affect of reproach and bitterness as he pleads with the lady — or is it also the king in whose service he has laboured? — not to take his devotion entirely for granted:

Forget not yet the tried intent  
Of such a truth as I have meant;  
My great travail so gladly spent  
    Forget not yet

Forget not yet when first began  
The weary life ye know since whan  
The suit, the service none tell can  
    Forget not yet.

Forget not yet the great assays,  
The cruel wrong, the scornful ways,  
The painful patience in denays,<sup>34</sup>  
    Forget not yet.

Forget not yet, forget not this,  
How long ago hath been and is  
The mind that never meant amiss,  
    Forget not yet.

Forget not then thine own approved,  
The which so long hath thee so loved,  
Whose steadfast faith yet never moved,<sup>35</sup>  
    Forget not this.

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34      denials

35      changed

Wyatt also introduced into English poetry a new poetic pattern called the sonnet, which he imported from Italy. He travelled abroad rather a lot, but unlike most early English humanists he was less attracted by classical learning than by the literary works of the Italian Renaissance poets like Petrarch.

The Petrarchan sonnet is a poem of 14 lines consisting of an octave (an 8-line stanza) and a sestet (6 lines) or two tercets (twice 3 lines). The theme of this kind of poem was also borrowed from Petrarch, who reproduced all the characteristics of courtly love, including the tradition of the lover seen as a humble servant to a lady who is often cruel; he is wounded by a cold glance, is prey to despair when his love is rejected, and his mood changes according to whether his beloved is present or absent. This approach is similar to the one found in medieval courtly love, with the lady placed on a pedestal; but Petrarch brought it to a high and ideal plane of his own, and he was imitated by French and then by English poets of the Renaissance.

In brief, Petrarch gave English poetry through Wyatt a highly conventionalized form, and a sophisticated idealistic content (courtly love), in the guise of a new pattern called the sonnet.

Surrey (1517-47) also wrote sonnets, characterized by grace and tenderness of feeling; he has less strength but more polish than Wyatt — he is more sophisticated in expression yet less spontaneous. In the course of time, both Wyatt and Surrey adapted and transformed the pattern of the sonnet, since they tended to divide the 14 lines into three quatrains (4-line stanzas) and a final rhyming couplet. This is the form which Shakespeare and others would use later.

Importantly Surrey's pioneering work also lies in his use of blank verse (iambic pentameters with no rhyme) in his translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

It is worth pointing out that most of the poems written at the time were not printed in the poet's lifetime; they simply circulated in manuscripts. Yet, after the death of both Wyatt and Surrey, many of their poems were printed in Tottel's *Miscellany* (1559), an anthology which is one of the best collections of the lyrics of the time.

Here is a famous sonnet by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey:

Alas, so all things now do hold their peace,  
Heaven and earth disturbèd in nothing;  
The beasts, the air, the birds their song do cease,  
The nighte's chair the stars about doth bring;  
Calm is the sea, the waves work less and less.

So am not I, whom love, alas, doth wring,  
Bringing before my face the great increase  
Of my desires, whereat I weep and sing  
In joy and woe, as in a doubtful ease:  
For my sweet thoughts sometime do pleasure bring,  
But by and by the cause of my disease  
Gives me a pang that inwardly doth sting,  
When that I think what grief it is again  
To live and lack the thing should rid my pain.

Although the Renaissance was characterized by an explosion of lyrical poetry (expressing feelings) and by the introduction of a new poetic pattern (the sonnet) from Italy, this poetry did not replace the older, medieval forms: in other words, there is also a tradition of narrative satirical verse.

### Satirical verse

A lot of satirical verse was still being written. (Remember that the satirical vein found expression in the Middle Ages in the fabliau tradition, then with Langland and Chaucer, and with Lydgate in the 15th century.) It was continued in the Renaissance with poets like:

John Skelton (1460-1529). Skelton wrote in the medieval tradition; he attacked the abuses of courtly life and satirized the new fashions in thought, religion, and behaviour, as well as personal enemies, among whom, collectively, the Scots. One of his characters is the common peasant Colyn Clout. In some of his works he used what is now called the Skeltonic line: i.e., a short two-beat line — with only two stressed syllables. Skelton was Henry VIII's tutor and was held in high esteem by humanists such as Erasmus.

Alexander Barclay (1475-1552). Like Skelton he is a traditional poet. His main work, *The Ship of Fools*, is based on a common Renaissance motif and seems to have been an adaptation of an Alsatian version by Sebastian Brandt. Erasmus also wrote one version on the same theme in Latin. These satires all express a shift from the medieval religious interest in moral evil (for example, the concern with the seven deadly sins) to a preoccupation with intellectual folly. This is significant of the new age, in which people were moving away from religious criteria of good and evil towards an approach to life that was more centred on man.

## Drama

In the Tudor period we move from the medieval religious Morality play to a secular Morality play called the 'interlude'. In other words, there is a shift from a religious kind of play that was anonymous and not specifically located (since it was based on church doctrine so that its message was true anywhere in the Christian world) to plays called interludes that are topical (i.e., they deal with a particular topic relevant at the time). Interludes are also mundane and aristocratic; they were performed at the court and written by figures of definite importance. Human vices are still represented on the stage, but the moral theme is related to this our world, which means for example that the journey of life should be made under the guidance of both reason and sensuality (as opposed to the guidance of religion), so that more and more often evil results not from ignoring the way of God, but from going astray from the *via media* — i.e., the middle path of reasonable behaviour. Also, man's propensity to sensuality is dramatized with pagan and realistic vigour, and is often a source of mirth.

In some interludes of the Tudor period we already find a mixture of serious and comic elements, which will be characteristic of Elizabethan drama. Again, the humour often derives from the description of low life and vices.

John Heywood (1497-1580) was the most striking representative of early Tudor drama. He was a court entertainer and had two main qualities, liveliness of action and witty dialogue. His characters are types (they have no psychological depth and do not develop) but they owe nothing to medieval morality. In the interlude called *The Play of the Weather* (1533), for instance, an emissary of Jupiter tries to find out the ideal weather for humanity, only to discover that opinions conflict hopelessly. With Heywood the interlude mainly aimed at entertaining, but also at edifying (this stress on education is something which we also find in prose works of the period) and instructing an aristocratic audience in the new ideas and sciences and the geographical discoveries of the time.

The interlude reached a high point under the reign of Henry VIII, and much of its effect depended on the brilliance of its social setting (the court and aristocracy); but it lost its carefree levity when it became political and snobbed its aristocratic public. Indeed with John Skelton (the satirical poet) the interlude starts dealing with political problems of the time while with John Bale (1495-1563) it takes a religious turn, since Bale was a proponent of the Reformation, who therefore opposed the authority of the

Pope. So, the interlude gradually became a tribune or a platform for debating the current problems of the time. It continued to be produced up to the end of the reign of Elizabeth, side by side with comedies, tragedies and historical plays which started to be written and performed on English stages at that time. These new forms of drama, including the distinction between comedies and tragedies, were introduced into English literature as a result of the Renaissance, which privileged the study of the Ancients.

## 2. The reign of Elizabeth (1558-1603)

The Elizabethan period is one of the greatest in English literature. It is an age of poetry and of drama, and an age during which prose entered the field of literature properly speaking, since it was now used for works of fiction (indeed these narrative works of fiction in prose were in fact the origins of what would become the novel in the 18th century).

It was a period 1) of religious toleration, as Anglicanism (the doctrine of the new Church of England) represented a middle way between Catholicism and Lutheran Protestantism<sup>36</sup> — as we have seen, with the reigning monarch as the head of the Church; 2) of relative social contentment, in as much as this is at all possible in a regime of absolute monarchy, but at least some laws were passed to help the poor and some attempts were made to suppress vagrancy; 3) of intellectual progress and development in the arts: there was a new approach to architecture, literature, and music, and lyrical poetry in particular reached its first climax in England (the second was the romantic age in the first half of the 19th century); 4) of national pride and enthusiasm: the English defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, which was celebrated not just as a military victory, but as a religious one too.<sup>37</sup> Colonial expeditions to the 'New World' were started with Sir Francis Drake. It is under the reign of Elizabeth that England was called 'merry England'; there were many fairs and various forms of popular entertainment, in what is remembered as an age of 'progress and prosperity'.

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<sup>36</sup> Martin Luther (1483-1546): German leader of the Protestant Reformation; he translated the Bible into German (1521-34).

<sup>37</sup> The Spanish Armada was the great fleet sent by Philip II of Spain against England in 1588: defeated in the Channel by the English fleets and almost completely destroyed by storms off the Hebrides.

Before we discuss the various genres prominent in the Elizabethan period, we should remember that the Renaissance means first of all the study and imitation of the original texts of the Ancients; and also that it started in Italy before moving on to France and England, while in England there was already a native medieval tradition of literature before the Renaissance was felt. In other words, we should expect an influence from both Antiquity and the Continent, but as we have seen, after borrowing and imitating things from abroad the English came to stand on their own feet, as they adapted what they borrowed to their own tastes and literary traditions.

## Translation

The most significant translation endeavours of the time were devoted to the text of the Bible. An Oxford scholar who had been received into the Church before Henry VIII's break with Rome, William Tyndale proposed to emulate Luther and write a translation of the Holy Scriptures into the vernacular. The King turned down his offer and he went into exile. He published his English version of the New Testament in 1526 and it was an immediate success (something of a bestseller). His translation of the Old Testament was interrupted by his beheading in 1536. Coverdale took over and completed what came to be known as the Tyndale and Coverdale Bible, which the King eventually patronised (see above). But there were competing translations. One was the collective work of Puritans when exiled in Geneva, and is called the Geneva Bible. In 1568 the official translation of the Church of England was the "Bishops' Bible", which was meant to counter the Calvinist leaning in the Geneva Bible. As to the Roman Church it was opposed to any vernacular version of the Holy text (as officialised at the Council of Trent, 1546).

The Renaissance approach to translating Holy Scriptures was characterised by great attention to the form of the text and a corresponding attempt to create real poetry to match the original. This is particularly clear in the metrical English versions of the Psalter, in the wake of Clément Marot's and Théodore de Bèze's French version. The most remarkable English translation of the Psalms of David was written by Philip and Mary Sidney. Actually Sir Philip Sidney had only had time to translate 43 psalms when he died and his sister Mary (see below) took over, revised the former translations, and masterfully completed the task. Here as an illustration of her accomplishment is Psalm 100, *Jubilate Deo* turned into a sonnet (a new form that is discussed below)

O all you lands, the treasures of your joy  
in merry show upon the Lord bestow:  
Your service cheerfully on him employ,

with triumph song into his presence go:  
know first that he is God, and after know  
that God did us (not we our selves) create.  
We are his flock, for us his feedings grow:  
we are his folk, and he upholds our state.  
With thankfulness, O enter then his gate:  
make through each porch of his your praises ring  
All good, all grace of his high name relate  
he of all grace, and goodness is the spring.  
Time in no terms his mercy comprehends:  
from age to age, his truth itself extends.

Because of the new interest in ancient texts there were many translations from the classics: Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives of Roman figures* (1579)<sup>38</sup>; Chapman's translation of Homer (1598-1616). There were also translations of Italian writers: Harrington's translation of Ariosto, an Italian poet and dramatist (15th-16th centuries) and Mary Sidney's translation of Petrarch's *Trionfi*.<sup>39</sup> These translations provided plot material for English writers (whether poets, dramatists, or prose writers); they had a favourable influence on the English language, for the Elizabethan translations are always more than just translations, in the sense that the original works were domesticated and adapted to the tastes of the time.

## Poetry

It should be remembered, first of all, that in the Elizabethan period quite a lot of poetry, and more particularly of lyrical poetry, occurred as part of drama (which was often written in verse).

### Lyrical poetry

1. The **sonnet**. As we have seen, the sonnet form was inherited from Petrarch (in Italy) but also from the *Pleiade* (a group of seven poets, including Ronsard and du Bellay, in France), and it was introduced into English literature by Wyatt and Surrey; it became highly fashionable in the Elizabethan age and soon grew into a conventional form regulated by severe rules regarding theme, imagery and language use.

As we have seen, the most common theme is that of courtly love, with the lady making sure that she remains beyond the lover's reach, so that he complains of his own

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<sup>38</sup> He used Jacques Amyot's French text as his starting point.

<sup>39</sup> While a fairly literal translation Sidney's version of Petrarch's poems effects a subtle shift to the original.

unworthiness and, often, of his lady's coldness. This often means that the lover has ambivalent or contradictory feelings towards the lady.

Since there is this tendency to idealize the lady, it is perhaps no wonder that so many sonnets were addressed to the Queen, and were meant as praise or flattery in order to get promotion or to ask a favour from her. Actually, under Elizabeth, writing sonnets almost had a social function: they were usually not meant to be published, but were considered the true accomplishment of a courtier and of anyone who had anything to ask from the Queen. In some cases they were also a means of expressing criticism.

Many sonnets or sequences of sonnets were written by poets or courtiers who simply wanted to prove their skill or craftsmanship. In other words, the sonnets were appreciated for the poetic inventiveness to which they testify, not for their autobiographical revelations or for their sincerity. The situation was conventional: the woman concerned might be fictitious, or if she was real, the poet was perhaps not seriously in love with her; her essential function was to serve as a symbol for what was unattainable but infinitely desirable. The only sure weapon the lover possessed was the reminder of mortality, as in this example from Samuel Daniel's *Sonnets to Delia* (1592):

Time, cruel time, come and subdue that brow  
Which conquers all but thee; and thee too stays,  
As if she were exempt from scythe or bow,  
From love or years, unsubject to decays.  
Or art thou grown in league with those fair eyes,  
That they may help thee to consume our days?  
Or dost thou spare her for her cruelties,  
Being merciless like thee, that no man weighs?  
And yet thou see'st thy power she disobey;  
Cares not for thee, but lets thee waste in vain;  
And prodigal of hours and years betrays  
Beauty and Youth to Opinion and Disdain.  
Yet spare her, Time, let her exempted be;  
She may become more kind to thee or me.

Obviously, under the disguise of addressing Time, the poet is really addressing the lady, and he appeals to her with a combination of reproach, threat, and high compliment. Time, then, is a mere figure of speech in Daniel's sonnet, and his attitude to the lady is basically conventional. Better poets than Daniel used the convention, but went beyond it. Thus in the following sonnet (64 in his sequence) Shakespeare uses the convention for a very serious meditation on Time — the paradox that the very winning of the beloved is



itself the beginning of tragedy, since mortality has already doomed the lover to loss of the beloved:

When I have seen by Time's fell hand defaced  
The rich proud cost of outworn buried age,  
When sometime lofty towers I see down razed  
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;  
When I have seen the hungry ocean gain  
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,  
And the firm soil win of the watery main,  
Increasing store with loss, and loss with store;  
When I have seen such interchange of state,  
Or state itself confounded to decay,  
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminare,  
That Time will come and take my love away.  
    This thought is as a death, which cannot choose  
    But weep to have that which it fears to lose.

Thus, with great poets like Sidney and Shakespeare (for instance), the conventionalized form of the sonnet was used creatively and vivified with a sense of 'genuine' experience, whatever the actual case may have been.

After Wyatt and Surrey the sonnet was practised by Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton and William Shakespeare; later, in the 17th century, John Donne reacted against the conventional use of language, against the meaningless but decorative images, and against the oversweet melody used by minor Elizabethan poets.

**b. The song.** The age delighted in lyrics (songs). Clearly this is something it had in common with the Middle Ages, though these lyrics are mostly pleasant for their youthful and romantic feelings (as opposed to medieval songs which were more realistic and less sophisticated in language), and also for their sweet diction and musicality (i.e., their rhythm, sounds, alliterations, etc).

Many song-books were published, in which we find the names of Nicholas Breton (1545-1626), Thomas Campion (1567-1620), George Gascoigne (1542-77), whose songs were light love lyrics.

Shakespeare also wrote many songs in his plays, mainly in his comedies, either to illustrate the main theme or to offer a diversion from it. Some of these songs are also pleasant love lyrics, but a few are more complex.

Some of the songs deal with a pastoral theme, a theme which is typical of the Renaissance. See, for example, *The Ploughman's Song* by Nicholas Breton:

In the merry month of May,  
In a morn by break of day,  
Forth I walked by the wood-side  
Whereas May was in his pride.  
There I spièd, all alone,  
Phyllida and Corydon.  
Much ado there was, God wot,<sup>40</sup>  
He would love and she would not.  
She said, never man was true;  
He said, none was false to you.  
He said he had loved her long;  
She said, love should have no wrong.  
Corydon would kiss her then;  
She said maids must kiss no men  
Till they did for good and all.  
Then she made the shepherd call  
All the heavens to witness truth:  
Never loved a truer youth.  
Thus with many a pretty oath,  
Yea and nay, and faith and troth,  
Such as silly shepherds use  
When they will not love abuse,  
Love, which had been long deluded,  
Was with kisses sweet concluded.  
And Phyllida with garlands gay  
Was made the Lady of the May.

Note on the **pastoral** theme, also called 'Arcadia'.<sup>41</sup> The pastoral theme goes back to the Greek and Latin traditions (it was used by poets like Theocritus and Virgil, for instance), and it deals with idealized shepherds and shepherdesses who are more concerned with their love affairs and their singing than with their shepherding. It can be found in all sorts of works, from plays to prose romance, but is often associated with poetry. The English wrote pastoral songs expressing a longing for the golden age (i.e., for the simplicity of life in nature): a natural mode of life that had supposedly been lost; in other words, the pastoral theme can express a desire to escape from the complexity of human problems and worries, or from the corruption of courts and cities.

In his comedy *As You Like It*, Shakespeare makes fun of this wish to return to nature as an answer to all problems (he denounces this as a form of escapism). Nonetheless the pastoral theme was widely used during the Renaissance, in lyrical poetry but also in

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<sup>40</sup> knows.

<sup>41</sup> See <http://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=71>

narrative poetry, where it was then combined with a satirical or moral purpose (presenting a criticism of society and sometimes involving religious issues also). In other words, the pastoral mode does not merely involve a dream-world, an escape from the complexity of real life, but it can also involve a criticism of society and be used therefore for moral and satirical purposes.

Two **women poets** of the Elizabethan age deserve to be mentioned. **Isabella Whitney** was an educated but lower middle-class woman writer who mostly used popular forms such as the ballad. Most of her poems are occasional. “Whitney uses classical and biblical reference, but many of her sources are popular and vernacular, deriving from earlier English adaptations of classical stories (for example Chaucer and John Gower) as well as more recent translations.”<sup>42</sup> Her poem “Will and Testament”, which is part of the collection *A Sweet Nosgay* (1573), “takes a wry look at the relentless mercantilism of 1560s London” as it “blends irony testament and topography in an attempt at humourous self-presentation.”<sup>43</sup> She bestows all she does not have, for instance, fine lace and ruffs... in the pawnshop; buildings and churches. She even has lines about her own book:

To all the Bookbinders by Paul's  
because I like their Art:  
They ev'ry week shall money have,  
when they from Books depart.  
Amongst them all, my Printer must,  
have somewhat to his share:  
I will my Friends these Books to buy  
of him, with other ware.

**Mary Sidney** was Sir Philip Sidney's younger sister (see below), so not only highly educated but moving in upper class circles and involved in a militant form of protestantism. Her remarkable political and literary activities unfolded in the wake of her brother's untimely death in 1586. Most of her poetic production consists of translations: the Psalms of David and Petrarch's *Triumph of Death* (see above).

### Narrative poetry

Narrative poetry, which was the main form of poetry in the Middle Ages, continued alongside lyrical poetry. Far from dying out, narrative poetry still ranked high in the Renaissance hierarchy of genres, as it did with the Ancients (one remembers the epics of

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<sup>42</sup> Danielle Clark, *Renaissance Women Poets*, Penguin, 2000, xiii

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* xiv. The testamentee is the City of London.

Homer and Virgil). One of the main works in this genre at the time is *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1559). It consists of a series of stories in verse concerning the misfortunes of great figures in English history. It was written by several people, but was initiated by the poet Thomas Sackville. This work is a good example of the Renaissance interest in the didactic aspects of history (i.e., in a study of the past as a proper education for a prince), since it teaches him by means of examples what should be emulated and what should be avoided. The authors are concerned with the nature of order and of justice in the state (also a theme in Shakespeare's historical plays), and with the ways in which human crimes are punished by divine retribution. *The Mirror for Magistrates* thus reinterprets the medieval concept of the wheel of fortune and mankind's unpredictable fate, in order to show the political and ethical background of the spectacular falls of certain kings; in other words, they strive to show the moral causes of their fall.

Two more poets, Samuel Daniel (1562-1619) and Michael Drayton (1563-1631), were also attracted by historical subjects.

Samuel Daniel wrote *The Civil Wars between the Two Houses of Lancaster and York*. In it, he treats the stormy period that Shakespeare also covers in his history plays — i.e., the one ranging from Richard II to Henry VI. Daniel is a moralist and a historian first of all. He wrote a poetry of reflection, not of passion. Patriotism was his dominant interest and led him to devote most of his efforts to the history of his country. Yet, as a true Elizabethan gentleman, he also wrote some fine lyrics and sonnets (*To Delia*).

Michael Drayton practised many kinds of poetry: he could write good lyrics and sonnets, but his main interest was also with narrative verse. He wrote *The Barons' War*, a kind of companion piece to Daniel's *Civil Wars*. He also gave expression to his patriotism in his long poem *Polyolbion*. But here he forsakes history for geography and he celebrates England, which he calls 'the Isle of many blessings', conducting the reader through all the counties of England, and giving numerous detailed descriptions enriched by local legends.

### Philip Sidney (1554-86)

Philip Sidney was a scholar, a poet, a fiction writer, a critic, a diplomat and a courtier; he embodied the Renaissance ideal of aristocratic moral and intellectual virtue: he was learned, refined, and a sincere idealist — though he was also a man of action, involved in the diplomatic and political life of his country. None of his writings were published in his lifetime.

From a literary point of view, three achievements rank him among the best of Elizabethan writers. Although he was a scholar and knew the work of the Ancients, his work is representative of Renaissance romanticism in that he believed in the power of the imagination (as opposed to classicism, an attitude characterized by obedience to the strict forms of the classical models). Like all great writers, perhaps, he was a man of his time but went beyond mere fashion.

1. He had a strong influence on the development of the **prose romance** with his *Arcadia* (published 1590), a complex pastoral romance in prose telling a pastoral love story in an ideal country of the imagination. This world includes shipwrecked princes, beautiful princesses, chivalric adventures, lost infants, mistaken identities, with true love winning in the end. The plot is loose and contains many subsidiary tales. The intention, as in the prose romances in general, was to cultivate high aristocratic (idealistic) morality, as well as to entertain; and part of the entertainment lay in the elaborate musical style reminiscent of the sophisticated rhetorical devices that Lyly had innovated, and which the Elizabethans used in order to embellish their prose and make it as ornate as their poetry. Yet, as we will see presently, Sidney was less extreme and mechanical in his use of artifice than Lyly was, for with Sidney the sophistication in style echoes, and contributes to the expression of, a matching sophistication in content. Consider the following extract:

So it is, Mistress, said he, that yesterday driving my sheep up to the stately hill, which lifts his head over the fair City of *Mantineia*, I happened upon the side of it, in a little falling of the ground which was a rampier against the Sun's rage, to perceive a young maid, truly of the finest stamp of beauty, and that which made her beauty the more admirable, there was at all no art added to the helping of it. For her apparel was but such as Shepherds' daughters are wont to wear: and as for her hair, it hung down at the free liberty of his goodly length, but that sometimes falling before the clear stars of her sight, she was forced to put it behind her ears, and so open again the treasure of her perfections, which that for a while had in part hidden. In her lap there lay a Shepherd, so wrapped up in that well-liked place, that I could discern no piece of his face; but as mine eyes were attent in that, her Angel-like voice strake mine ears with this song:

*My true love hath my heart, and I have his,  
By just exchange, one for the other giv'n.  
I hold his dear, and mine he cannot miss:  
There never was a better bargain driv'n.*

*His heart in me, keeps me and him in one,  
My heart in him, his thoughts and senses guides:  
He loves my heart, for once it was his own:  
I cherish his, because in me it bides.*

2. His main literary achievement lies in his poetry, especially a sequence of 108 sonnets entitled *Astrophel and Stella* (published 1591). This is a conventional sequence of sonnets in that it is an imitation of Petrarch and the French Pleiad poets, and the poems deal with courtly love.

Yet Sidney's sonnets, just like Shakespeare's, reveal a strong autobiographical sincerity: indeed Sidney realized, but too late (when she married another gentleman), that he loved a young lady to whom he might in fact have become betrothed. In his sonnets he thus expresses bitter regret for lost happiness; the irresistible but impossible desire to possess the beloved; his despair at her first coldness; the sweetness of feeling himself loved by her even though she runs away from him; and the struggle in his virtuous heart between duty and passion, reason and desire.

3. His third achievement is his *Apology for Poesy* (published 1595). His first aim here is to defend the art of poetry against the accusations of moral harmfulness made by the Puritans.

Elizabethan works of criticism were mainly concerned with rhetoric (figures of style), with various forms of versification, and with attacks on, or a defense of, the social influence of the theatre. Sidney is the first in England to discuss the nature, the function, and the possibilities of poetry. For him the poet is a *maker* or a *creator*, not just someone who happens to be writing in verse. He believes in the superiority of imagination over facts or acknowledged rules in art (classicism); for him, the poet creates and is a finer influence than the historian, the philosopher or the mathematician. And this influence can even be a moral one:

Now therein of all sciences (I speak still of humane, and according to the humane conceits) is the Poet the Monarch. For he doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it. Nay, he doth, as if your journey should lie through a fair Vineyard, at the first give you a cluster of Grapes, that, full of that taste, you may long to pass further. He beginneth not with obscure definitions, which must blur the margent with interpretations, and load the memory with doubtfulness; but he cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion, either accompanied with, or prepared for, the well enchanting skill of Musick; and with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you: with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner. And, pretending no more, doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue: even as the child is often brought to take most wholesome things by hiding them in such other as have a pleasant taste: which, if one should begin to tell them the nature of *Aloes* or *Rhubarb* they should receive, would sooner take their Physick at their ears than at their mouth. So it is in men (most of which are childish in the best things, till they be cradled in their graves); glad they will be to hear the tales of *Hercules*, *Achilles*, *Cyrus*, and *Aeneas*; and hearing them, must needs hear the right description of wisdom, valour, and justice; which, if they

had been barely, that is to say, Philosophically set out, they would swear they be brought to school again.

Through his approach to poetry, Sidney thus comes across as a romantic. In spite of all his dependence on classical learning (we find echoes in his work of Aristotle, Plato, Horace, and the Italian poets), he defends the spirit of poetry: i.e., the power of the imagination to create another world. He does not deny at times that poetry can be free from a sense of morality, but he insists that the main purpose of art is to elevate humanity above facts and figures:

Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as diverse Poets have done, neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely.

Here again one perceives the idealising nature of his conceptions.

In all his writings Sidney reveals himself as belonging to the idealistic tendency present in the English Renaissance — and this, in the fields of poetry (with his sonnets), of prose fiction (with his romance *Arcadia*), and of criticism (with his *Apology for Poesy*).

### Edmund Spenser (1552-99)

Spenser wrote long narrative poems and lyrical poems but no plays. He had the ambition to write English poems that would be as great and as much admired as the classical epics of Homer and Virgil. He also used the pastoral theme, very fashionable at the time of the Renaissance, for moral and satirical purposes.

Spenser was aware of many popular stories and myths which had lingered on after the Middle Ages: Arthurian tales, allegories, or supernatural elements like giants and enchanters. He wanted to write narrative poems in which a mixture of native subjects would combine with a classical ambition in presentation. For example, he would use the form of the classical epics of Homer and Virgil. So, in Spenser the medieval and the Renaissance meet, as do the popular and the courtly (aristocratic) strains of the tradition.

His first long narrative poem, *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1579), consists of twelve eglogues (i.e., pastoral poems), one for each month of the year. Each poem gives an account of the English countryside as it commonly appears in each month of the year, but at the same time Spenser deals with a variety of contemporary themes, from

church satire to the praise of the Queen. In this poem he expresses his patriotic, literary and ecclesiastical opinions. He stands for 'ultra English' poetry, as incarnated by Chaucer, for Low Church theology (a strict and pure democratic form of Protestantism), and he is against High Church formalism — i.e., its fondness for elaborate rituals, which offended his Protestant idealism.

Spenser also wrote other pastoral poems, in which the Queen is the great Shepherdess; elegies, among which one written on the death of Sidney; and, naturally, a sequence of sonnets, entitled *Amoretti*, in honour of his bride.

Spenser's other great narrative poem is *The Faerie Queene* (written between 1589 and 1596). This is the culmination, the great synthesis of themes and influences which the Elizabethan age had been awaiting. Indeed Spenser absorbed, and handled creatively, the moral and intellectual currents of the time, without forgetting the classical and the English medieval past. The poem is: 1) an allegorical pastoral romance in verse; 2) a commentary on the religious, political and social scene; 3) a poetic exploration of the nature of virtue.

The fairy Queen, called Gloriana, represents the glory which comes from the possession of virtue, and this character is also an embodiment of Queen Elizabeth. Gloriana sends twelve knights on separate adventures, and it becomes clear that each knight represents a virtue (Love, Faith, Friendship, etc). Moreover Spenser sends out Prince Arthur, a character derived from the Arthurian legends who is also an example of superior virtue, to help the various knights whenever their particular virtue proves insufficient to overcome the ordeal they have to face.

Spenser thus turns out to be attuned to both the people and the court of England, since he is familiar with the traditions and the superstitions of the common people, and he can use their natural simple speech, but he is also interested and involved in the sophistication of the aristocrat.

*The Faerie Queene* is full of noble (moral) ideals, patriotism, polite learning, and chivalry. Spenser's ethical motive is clear: he wants to train a gentleman or noble person in a culture of virtuous and gentle discipline — in other words, to shape a conception of a truly civilized man. But he also wants to please and praise the Queen, in her two capacities as monarch and as lady. To a modern reader, the poem remains relevant for its beautiful descriptions of Elizabethan Ireland, of landscapes made of plains and forests, of gorgeous processions of figures from legends of the past. As



well, it remains striking for the perfect melody of Spenser's verse, his lofty moral purity, his idealism and his love of beauty — however much these may contrast with the grim business of colonial ‘pacification’ the man was involved in as Governor of Ireland.

Spenser also aimed at the reformation of poetic diction: he wrote very pure English and fought against what he called ‘inkhorn terms’: i.e., foreign words introduced by the Renaissance, which, to him, were corrupting the English vocabulary. As he wrote to his humanist friend Gabriel Harvey, ‘So now, they have made our English tongue a gallimaufry or hodgepodge of all other speeches’. It is in keeping that he tried to restore Chaucerian vigour and simplicity to the English language – although, in this, he remains ironically oblivious to the fact that Chaucer’s language was itself the result of a combination of influences. Besides, he invented what is now called the Spenserian stanza, composed of nine iambic lines, in which the first eight are pentameters and the last is an hexameter (twelve syllables), the whole rhyming on the following pattern: abab bcbc c. He designed this form for *The Faerie Queene*:

And is there care in heaven? and is there love  
In heavenly spirits to these creatures base,  
That may compassion of their evils move?  
There is: else much more wretched were the case  
Of men, than beasts. But, O! th'exceeding grace  
Of highest God, that loves his creatures so,  
And all his works with mercy doth embrace,  
That blessed angels he sends to and fro,  
To serve to wicked man, to serve his wicked foe.

The design makes for stateliness rather than narrative movement; indeed Spenser was possibly a master of description rather than narrative.

In conclusion Spenser drew together traditions from medieval English poetry, from the Latin and Greek classics (the pastoral and the epic), and from the Renaissance itself (his patriotism and his abstract moral idealism in which there was no room for the actual people who were suffering and dying because of the system he was a representative of). He fused these in his poetry, in which his Protestant love of purity and simplicity and his attraction for medieval naturalness and vigour combine with the formality of the great classical epics.

## Prose

Although, as we have seen, the Elizabethan age is an especially prosperous one in the fields of lyrical poetry and of drama, it is equally significant that prose was now used in works of fiction and for the sake of entertainment (as against the didactic use to which it was put previously).

### Prose narratives

1. The **romance**. The Elizabethan romance is not written in verse as in the Middle Ages, but it is still a story expressing an idealised view of life for an educated and sophisticated public. Typically, there were first translations of Italian and French novellas (narratives in prose). These translations introduced new themes and materials into English literature, and thus enlarged its scope. Moreover, with these translations the writers learned to manipulate the English language and to give prose more suppleness and subtlety; they also introduced new words of Italian and French origin. They thus raised the status and quality of English prose style, as the early Tudors had done in didactic works. Now this is done in works of fiction — i.e., in literary works of greater artistic sophistication.

A famous example of such translations is William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure*, in which the author introduces the reader to the love stories of Boccaccio, Bandello, Queen Margaret of Navarre, etc. Painter's intention is to please and he announces this quite clearly: 'The sad shall be discharged of heaviness, the angry purged, the pleasant maintained in mirth, the sick relieved from grief...'.

After translating continental novellas, the English wrote their own romances in prose. Among the main writers of English romances, we shall mention three.

John Lyly (1554-1606) is remembered for his famous *Euphues or the Anatomy of Wit* (1578). The narrative is simple and deals with both the attraction and the dangers of Italy. Euphues goes to Italy (Naples) where he leads a life of pleasure: he loses his virtue, breaches his loyalty to a friend, and becomes morally corrupt; he realizes his error, but only after he himself has fallen victim to the perversity and corruption that surround him. The story ends with moral and religious dissertations.

The book is filled with lessons in 'wisdom' and with attacks on the irreligion and immorality to be found in a Catholic country. Italy, of course, was taken as a target by English writers because it was the stronghold of the Roman Catholic Church: we must not forget that in England the 'revival of learning' (i.e., humanism) was the work of

people who were much concerned with the Reformation — witness Roger Ascham, who no longer considers it necessary for educated people to go to Italy, because it is seen as a place of corruption.

Lyly's second romance is *Euphues and his England* (1580). Again, the plot is very simple. The work is full of flattering insincerities about the country and its Queen, its universities, and above all about its ladies; it contains brilliant discussions on refined manners, sophisticated sentiments, which lead not to sensuality but to moral reflections. The book was successful for it was about the higher circles of society, not as they actually were but as they wanted to be regarded. If Lyly gives such an idealized picture of England and its aristocracy, it is to prevent them from going over to the continent (because of its loose morals, its corruption and Catholicism); he tells his fellow countrypeople that they have, or can have, the same refinement at home but without the moral corruption. Here is an example of Lyly's usual smug nationalistic stance, as expressed in his *Euphues and his England*:

There are also in this Island two famous Universities, the one *Oxford*, the other *Cambridge*, both for the profession of all sciences, for Divinity, Physick, Law, and all kind of learning, excelling all the Universities in Christendom.

I was myself in either of them, and like them both so well that I mean not in the way of controversy to prefer any for the better in *England*, but both for the best in the world, saving this, that Colleges in *Oxford* are much more stately for the building, and *Cambridge* much more sumptuous for the houses in the town; but the learning neither lieth in the free stones of the one, nor the fine streets of the other, but out of them both do daily proceed men of great wisdom to rule in the commonwealth, of learning to instruct the common people, of all singular kind of professions to do good to all. And let this suffice, not to inquire which of them is the superior, but that neither of them have their equal; neither to ask which of them is the most ancient, but whether any other be so famous.

Lyly not only wanted to refine manners and sentiments, he also wanted to refine English prose: he innovated a new kind of prose style, extremely mannered and artificial, which is called **euphuism**. This is characterized by long symmetrical sentences which balance clause against clause, image against image, so as to produce an effect of ornament which is given priority over sense or meaning. Another, shorter example of this style is, 'They are commonly soonest believed that are best beloved, and they liked best whom we have known longest'. The reader forgets the thought behind the words, and looks for the machine-like arrangement of the sentences. In other words, euphuism is the decoration of style by images, comparisons, parallels; and the word became synonymous with affectation and artificiality, an overdecorated style full of mechanical graces and sophistication. Yet Lyly's stylistic innovations are important because they continued the

work started by the early humanists: i.e., he helped to refine the English prose style just as he also tried to refine manners by writing for ladies.

As seen above, Philip Sidney wrote *Arcadia* (1581), which is a pastoral romance taking place in Greece. This is significant in itself, since the Renaissance is energized by an interest in Antiquity, while the pastoral theme, which is to be found in poems of the period, also crops up in this romance.

*Arcadia* is discussed in the section on Sidney; we can repeat here that it is also a sophisticated work, full of symmetry, answering clauses, comparisons and stylistic devices of all sorts. In other words, it has a lot in common with euphuism, but the difference is that there is a real richness of imagery, an all-pervading love of beauty and of nature, so that the stylistic decoration and the elaborate rhetorical devices are here functional — they serve to express the intensity of life and of the writer's response to it. Sidney is more artistic, then, or less mechanical in his use of artifice, than Lyly was. His sophistication in style is only the reflection of a corresponding complexity of feeling.

Robert Greene (1560-92) also wrote euphuistic romances, for the simple reason that these romantic, aristocratic and sophisticated works were fashionable and in great demand at the time. His story *Pandosto* (1588), which was very popular, is now best known as the source for Shakespeare's play, *The Winter's Tale*. In his romances, Greene improved on Lyly: 1) by increasing the love interest (the plot, which was loose in Lyly, is becoming more complex); 2) by accelerating the narrative and making it more vivid.

However, Greene's imitation of Lyly was never really in earnest — he often wrote tongue-in-cheek, in a spirit of parody — and he soon got tired of euphuistic unrealities in both style and content. This is why in the second phase of his career he turned to sheer realism: i.e., to the writing of realistic prose tales (as opposed to sophisticated, idealizing romances).

2. The **realistic prose tale**. In his second phase Greene wrote realistic prose tales full of sociological realism, describing the low life of Elizabethan London — the thieves, the rogues, their tricks and their victims. His 'Conversion of an English Courtesan' is a short novella, told in the first person, in which he presents a picture of low life in London.

Greene had many followers and imitators. Thomas Lodge (1558-1625) imitated his romances with his *Rosalynd* (1590), which Shakespeare used and transformed in *As You Like It*; and Greene's realistic tales were imitated by a number of people: 1) Thomas Dekker (1570-1632), also a dramatist, who put Greene's realism in a romantic setting; 2)

Thomas Nashe (1567-1601), whose work *The Unfortunate Traveller* is a chronicle of adventures taking the reader along the roads of France, Germany, and Italy; 3) Thomas Deloney (1543-1600) also wrote realistic tales in the manner of Robert Greene. He describes the work of craftsmen in simple realistic narratives. In *Jack of Newbury* (1597) he presents the life of weavers, and in *Gentle Craft* (1598) the life of shoemakers, with vividness and in seemingly authentic scenes and circumstances.

#### Miscellaneous prose – rhetoric, pamphlet, guidebook

1. **Treatises on rhetoric.** An important problem for Elizabethan writers and speakers was how to domesticate and assimilate the vast quantity of foreign words which humanism and the many translations had introduced into the language. This is why there was a blossoming of an art of rhetoric, perceptible in the many treatises on grammar, on figures of rhetoric and on the art of poetry. Among these Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poesy*, which is discussed above, takes pride of place.

2. **Pamphlets.** There are many pamphlets dealing with the religious controversies of the time: for example, the pamphlets (1588-90) written by Martin Marprelate (the pen-name for an anonymous author or group of authors), written from a non-Anglican (Presbyterian) standpoint and denying the validity of bishops; and the Anglican replies by the best pens of the time: Lyly, Greene, Nashe, and others.

There were also numerous pamphlets written against the theatre by the Puritans. Some thought that drama affected public morals. Someone like Heywood reacted against these attacks and contributed an *Apology for Actors* (1612). A major objection to drama among the Puritans was of a social (or democratic) nature. In 1642, after the excessive of Charles I and his wife, they managed to have the theatres closed.

2. **Guidebook.** John Stow's *A Survey of London*, written in the year 1598 combines what we would expect of a guidebook to a famous city (some sort of Baedeker or Michelin guides, pointing its readers to significant buildings, complete with a sketch map) with historical and personal comments. Born in 1525 Stow had a long life for the time, and is also known for his excellent edition of Chaucer's works.

## Drama

The Elizabethan period is not only an age of poetry, and an age during which prose enters the field of fiction, it is also an age of drama. The re-discovery, the translation, and the study of the works of the ancients provided lots of material and models for plays.

The Queen patronized the theatre and attended performances at the Inns of Court,<sup>44</sup> in the Universities and royal schools, and in the new private theatre houses such as the Globe. Patronage was also granted to theatrical troops; and in 1576 the first theatre was built, though this was outside the city limits. In the 1590s the theatre was well established, but even though it was favoured by the court it was still found a nuisance by the city authorities. This is why the companies were attached to the house of a particular lord (for example, there were the Lord Admiral's men, or the Lord Chamberlain's men, etc). Yet in spite of such protection the very existence of commercial theatres made it possible for playwrights to be economically independent. Another feature of drama at the time is that women's parts were played by young boys. It is to be remembered too that at the time drama was not perceived as part of literature. It was in fact often pitched against literary conventions.

As we have seen, in the Middle Ages there were Miracle plays and Morality plays (both religious but in different ways), while the early 16th century saw the emergence of the interlude, a secular morality play which the humanists used as a means to entertain but also to convey the new ideas and discoveries of the Renaissance. In this, they were marking a shift from religious and moral values to more secular intellectual values. However, the interlude had no particular form or structure; whereas new dramatic forms (structure and patterns) were developed as a consequence of the re-discovery of the Ancients: English dramatists introduced the distinction between comedies and tragedies, which they adapted to their own tastes. Their models were mainly Latin plays by Terence (3rd century BC) and Plautus (2nd century BC) for comedy, and plays by Seneca (1st century AD) for tragedy.

### First comedies in English

There were comic elements in the various forms of medieval drama, though the comedy properly speaking did not exist as such. The first English comedies were written in

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<sup>44</sup> Institutions belonging to the legal profession, in London. The buildings resemble those of Oxford and Cambridge colleges, and their function is to be responsible for the education of those students of the law who intend to become barristers, with the right to plead in the senior courts of law.

imitation of the Latin comedy writers Terence and Plautus, but also of Renaissance Italian dramatists.

### 1. Adaptations from Latin comedies.

Nicholas Udall (1505-56) wrote *Ralph Roister Doister* (1551), a play which is sometimes called the first English comedy, presumably because the earlier comic interludes, notably by John Heywood, were too slight to count, whereas Udall's play is an adaptation of the *Miles Gloriosus* ('The Boastful Soldier') by Plautus. Ralph is a foolish and boastful soldier who is encouraged by a mischievous associate to make love to a respectable woman betrothed to a merchant. The play has a kind of farcical humour which it has in common with the popular interludes; on the other hand, it is an example of humanistic learning — it has a Latin model for the intrigue and the structure (division in 5 acts). This marriage of humanistic learning and popular entertainment (the popular realism of the setting, atmosphere and characters) is a union which was to give rise, forty years later, to the beginnings of the great period of English drama.

*Gammer Gurton's Needle* (first acted in 1566, and printed in 1575) is a slight but lively verse comedy of uncertain authorship. (A 'gammer' is an old woman, think of 'Granny'.) The play has a farcical intrigue: an old village woman loses her needle, and after upsetting the whole village with the search for the lost needle, she eventually finds it in the trousers of her farm-servant. This is a pure English country comedy on account of its realism (in setting and characters), but the plot construction is Latin (5 acts).

So, these two early English comedies are inoffensive in their morals, but rather 'vulgar' in their social tone. They are neither refined nor immoral. They are farcical: the humour depends on the situation more than on the dialogues. Both were written in verse.

### 2. Adaptations from Italian comedies.<sup>45</sup>

Two dramatists deserve to be remembered. John Lyly, who wrote romances in prose, also wrote comedies (mainly in prose), in which he introduced not only his euphuistic style but also a delicacy of tone and of sentiment: the approach is more romantic and fantastic than the one found in Udall's farces. For example, *Endymion* (1591) stages a romantic love affair between the moon and a mortal; *Alexander and Campaspe* (1584) is about the rivalry between Alexander the Great and a painter for the love of a Theban captive. Yet Alexander renounces his love when he realises that the girl is in love with

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<sup>45</sup> Themselves sometimes derived and adapted from a Latin original.

the painter. Lyly, then, delights in presenting his characters performing deeds of tenderness and magnanimity. His plays are less farcical than the ones of his predecessors, and more refined and sophisticated in as much as they are based on feelings, on love, and are therefore more idealizing or 'romantic'.

Robert Greene liked variety, and as he did in his romances he used complex plots with sub-plots (like Lyly, usually including a love story). Also, Greene combined in his plays realistic, farcical elements derived from Latin comedies with comic devices taken from the English interlude (as, for example, Vice riding to Hell on the back of the Devil), and also an element of allegory derived from the medieval morality play. However, although his comedies contain all these medieval and Latin elements, they have an altogether new flavour, because he subordinated the form not to the action but to an atmosphere characterized by a gentle and dream-like romanticism — a sense of nostalgia and day-dreaming fantasy. He was thus very different from the crude realism, or the farcical trend, of Udall, and more akin to Lyly's romanticism.

His best-known comedy is *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (acted 1592). The play has a double plot: one concerns Bacon's manufacturing, with the help of the Devil, of a brass head endowed with the power of speech; and the other is a pastoral love story about the rival loves of two aristocrats for a village maid. This part is set in a woodland area impregnated with an idyllic atmosphere where evil, though very much present, is easily dispelled. Greene's double plots, his use of the clown in some of his comedies, and his romantic pastoral love stories, adumbrate the romantic comedies of Shakespeare.

To conclude this section on the beginnings of English comedy: it is important to remember that in the course of the second half of the 16th century the comedy, which was first farcical and realistic (i.e., the humour depended on the situation) and which preserved the Latin structure (the 5 acts, based on the development of one main action), gradually broadened into the true English Renaissance comedy with people such as Lyly and Greene. This means that: 1) the social status of the characters was raised, thereby leading to more sophistication in language and sentiment; 2) the story was enlarged to include a love-plot and thus more refined feelings and manners; 3) the literary medium was also refined, with the use of blank verse (without rhymes) and prose (the two alternating within the same play); 4) it also integrated comic realistic devices from both the English medieval tradition and the Latin tradition; 5) and finally, though at first it generally followed the classical development of one comic plot, English comedy later



developed in its own, free way, and as in Greene the plays came to subordinate form to atmosphere and content, and contained new elements of fantasy and more than one plot.

Greene exerted a great influence on Shakespeare's romantic comedies, most of which are based on the same premises and materials: i.e., a woodland setting and an idyllic atmosphere, plus the new dimension of fantasy and a love-plot usually including a sub-plot — which distinguishes this kind of play from the classical comedy, which it no longer strictly imitates.

### First tragedies in English

Contrary to what happened with comedy, there was hardly any tradition for tragedy-writing in England when Elizabeth rose upon the throne. The main model for the first English tragedies was Seneca (1st cent. AD), whose influence on the Elizabethan dramatists was great.

The first English tragedy, entitled *Gorboduc* (acted 1562), was written by Sackville and Norton in blank verse. Apart from the plot, it owes everything to Seneca. The plot is derived from the ancient history of Britain, as it is reported by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia Regum Britaniae* (a Latin work translated into French by Wace, and then into English by Layamon; see above). The play is itself a 'mirror for magistrates': indeed it is a special warning to the young Queen against the dangers of sedition and of divided sovereignty. As in Seneca, there are lots of murders which are not shown on stage but reported. The play is classical in form, which is to say that it conforms to the division into 5 acts and it respects the rules of the three unities invented by Aristotle.<sup>46</sup>

*Gorboduc* and other, similar tragedies were meant for restricted and educated audiences including lawyers, courtiers, and of course the Queen.

The first popular tragedy is *The Spanish Tragedy* (1586), written in verse by Thomas Kyd (1558-94). With this, Kyd gave the English public what they wanted — just as Greene did with his realistic narratives.

Although he writes in verse, Kyd is no poet but a good deviser of stage tricks and a master of the art of giving the public the thrills they hunger for. He takes over three elements from Seneca: 1) the ghost; 2) the theme of revenge — i.e., the duty of revenge for the murder of a relative; 3) and the frequent use of stage declamations and soliloquies.

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<sup>46</sup> Aristotle was a Greek philosopher of the 4th century BC, who wrote about the dramatic works of his contemporaries and derived some rules from them, such as the necessity of the unities of time and place, to which the French classics added the unity of plot.

At the same time Kyd introduced new factors: 1) he does not take his subjects from classic mythology or from legendary British history (as in *Gorboduc*), but gives the audience a play of modern love and war; 2) as the Elizabethans liked complexity of action and Seneca's plays had a monotonous, single plot, Kyd introduced many sub-plots which he spiced up with hair-raising tricks and sensational incidents: for example, at the end of the play, the main character bites his own tongue and spits it out on the stage; 3) he does not hesitate to show eight murders and suicides on stage (just as Shakespeare will do later), whereas in Seneca's classical tragedies deaths were always reported by messengers; 4) he also devised the arrangement of a play within a play, which also goes against the rule of the unity of action, and which Shakespeare repeatedly used in his plays, for instance in *Hamlet* and in *The Tempest*.

All these tricks and devices were successful and started a main trend in the English Renaissance tragedy: i.e., the tragedy of revenge (or tragedy of blood); and they also opened the way for a non-classical tragedy, by which is meant a tragedy which does not respect the three unities of classical drama.

There were yet other kinds of tragedies: 1) English chronicles or history plays presenting the tragedies of kings, for instance George Peele's *Edward I* (and later Shakespeare's history plays); 2) domestic tragedies: i.e., not the tragedies of kings but those of ordinary people in their ordinary lives, for instance *Arden of Feversham* (1592), which presents an account of the murder of a leading citizen in Feversham in Kent. This tragedy is a record of middle-class life; it is badly constructed but extremely vivid in its picture of manners and customs.

### Christopher Marlowe (1564-93)

One year after Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (1586), Marlowe's first tragedy *Tamburlaine the Great*, written in blank verse, was performed and also gained the people's approval. This play already illustrates the qualities of Marlowe's mind and imagination. He is a man of the Renaissance and a poet who can use blank verse; indeed he is a man who praises and glorifies life on this earth as well as man's free, daring and arrogant mind. His heroes are supermen to whom the petty rules of ordinary morality do not seem to apply.

In *Tamburlaine* his themes are ambition, lust for power, and the glory of conquest; Tamburlaine challenges men and God with his strength. No enemy overcomes him except death — the same enemy as the one Everyman had to encounter in the Morality play. Yet the difference with the Morality play is a huge one: the author of *Everyman* looked to life-in-the-world as a spiritual journey in which the only hope of success (i.e.,

of gaining salvation in after-life) lay in the acceptance of God's will. Marlowe, on the other hand, challenges divine rule for he believes that the ecstasy of earthly glory is what really matters, whatever may happen later. This conception of character is Marlowe's main contribution to drama, and it reflects his free and daring mind, which is typical of the Renaissance spirit.

The subject of *Tamburlaine* is the life of the 14th-century Central Asian shepherd Timur, who rose by his conquests, and by his gigantic and pitiless energy, from obscurity to the position of one of the most powerful men in Asia. Tamburlaine's barbarity is not a matter of sheer violence or brutishness, for he worships the potentialities of the human mind, and he falls passionately in love with his bride, Zenocrate. Tamburlaine is in fact the product of Marlowe's characteristically Renaissance imagination, fascinated as he is by the earthly magnificence available to men of imaginative power who have the energy of their convictions. The play is essentially non-moral, for Tamburlaine is not judged, but presented as though he were a natural force. Indeed his victories are presented as the triumph of immense natural energy over civilizations that are equally cruel but weak and decadent.

Yet, in the second part of this tragedy, Tamburlaine is forced to face the truth that, though he feels his energies to be inexhaustible, he cannot triumph over death — first the death of his wife, then his own. The play is therefore a tragedy, that of a man who feels himself to be infinite but is nonetheless mortal. For the first time in drama, Marlowe uses blank verse eloquently — previously it had been used stiffly and unimaginatively, as in *Gorboduc* for instance. In *Tamburlaine* there is a sense in which the hero's energy is conveyed through Marlowe's own poetic energy. Consider the following passage, in which Tamburlaine's passion, that drives him to the heights of power, also drives him to the heights of ecstasy in love:

What is beauty, saith my sufferings, then?  
If all the pens that ever poets held  
Had fed the feelings of their masters' thoughts,  
And every sweetness that inspir'd their hearts,  
Their minds, and muses on admirèd themes;  
If all the heavenly quintessence they 'still  
From their immortal flowers of poesy,  
Wherein, as in a mirror, we perceive  
The highest reaches of a human wit —  
If these had made one poem's period  
And all combin'd in beauty's worthiness,  
Yet should there hover in their restless heads  
One thought, one grace, one wonder, at the least,

Which into words no virtue can digest.

Marlowe's typical figure of speech is hyperbole — not exactly in the meaning of 'exaggeration' but rather as a charging of language with feeling until it achieves an intensity which exceeds the literal meanings of the words. The words themselves are not especially 'poetical' or ornate; they are even rather plain, and get their strength from their rhythm and unflinching purposefulness: i.e., from the way in which sentence structure collaborates with rhythmic pattern, so that the lines are fused into a forceful speech.

Marlowe also discovered the splendid power of the sound of proper names:

Is it not brave to be a king, Techelles,  
Usumcasane and Theridamas?  
Is it not passing brave to be a king,  
And ride in triumph through Persepolis?

The *Jew of Malta* (1589) is again about a violent character. The Grand Seignior of Turkey having demanded the tribute of Malta, the governor of the island decides that it shall be paid by the local Jews. Barabas, a rich Jew who refuses the edict, has his money and house taken from him, and in revenge he begins a life of violence. He indulges in an orgy of slaughter, poisoning his own daughter Abigail, and causing her lover to die too. Malta being besieged by the Turks, he betrays the fortress to them and, as a reward, is made its governor. He now decides to kill all the Turkish officers, by means of a collapsible floor; but he is himself betrayed, and thrown down below the floor into a vessel of boiling water. His last words are: 'Die, life! Fly, soul! Tongue, curse thy fill and die!'

The language of *The Jew of Malta* is not always so fierce; sometimes the beauty of sound and rhythm (and again of proper names) is really fine:

I hope my ships I sent for Egypt and the bordering isles  
Are gotten up by Nilus wandering banks;  
Mine argosies from Alexandria  
Loaden with spice and silks, now under sail,  
Are smoothly gliding down by Candy shore  
To Malta through our Mediterranean Sea.

It has been suggested that the softness of the last line evokes the quiet movement of a sailing ship in the old days.

In *Tamburlaine* and *The Jew of Malta* the quest for material glory is unembarrassed by the values of the Christian world. Yet it is in his tragedy *Doctor Faustus* (1592) that Marlowe confronts this problem more directly. This was also written in blank verse, and significantly the play has characteristics of both the medieval Morality play and of the Renaissance: 1) of the medieval Morality play in so far as Doctor Faustus sells his soul to the devil (as represented by Mephistopheles) to gain unlimited power and universal knowledge; and he has one good angel to guide him and later to exhort him to repent before it is too late, as well as an evil angel to tempt him, to urge him towards sin and damnation — and, clearly, this conflict between vice and virtue for the possession of man's soul is typical of the medieval Morality play; 2) of the Renaissance, for Doctor Faustus is a Tamburlaine on the intellectual level: his ambition is to achieve infinite knowledge, and this thirst for knowledge is typical of the Renaissance as it has something splendidly disinterested about it. Moreover, the conflict experienced by Doctor Faustus is a convincing one, and the psychology of both Faustus and Mephistopheles is presented with moving insight. Importantly, then, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance fuse in *Doctor Faustus*, which shows the continuity but also the contrast between the two outlooks — especially as Doctor Faustus eventually chooses to be damned.

One of the things that Faustus orders the Devil to do for him is to bring back from the dead the beautiful Helen of Troy, the cause of the Trojan war. When Faustus sees her, he voices his delight in the following words:

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships  
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?  
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss. (*Kisses her.*)  
Her lips suck forth my soul; see where it flies!  
Come, Helen, come! Give me my soul again. [...]  
O, thou art fairer than the evening air,  
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars.

In *Doctor Faustus* Marlowe introduces a truly tragic situation, and he points forward to the great tragic heroes of Shakespeare, who are led to self-destruction as a result of the corruption or the misuse of their own virtues. Indeed Marlowe shows with the character of Faustus that the best in man can lead him to his downfall; if Faustus had had a less aspiring nature, or if he had been less daring and imaginative, he would probably have been a more virtuous person, but also a less interesting one — and not a tragic hero.

Marlowe also wrote *Edward II* (1593), in which the main interest is still centred on one character, even though this time the tragedy is a study of weakness, rather than a study of strength and the glorification of one's power. It misses the fire of *Tamburlaine* but allows greater scope in the interpretation of character. Edward II is a sentimental weakling betrayed and led to his death by the forces of ambition and cruelty. In this play, Marlowe has taken a theme derived from English history and has raised it from the formlessness of the old chronicle plays — which simply record the events in the life of a king — to the status of tragedy.

It has been suggested that Marlowe helped Shakespeare with the writing of *Henry VI* and other early plays. Had he lived longer, he might have rivalled with Shakespeare (whom, anyway, he greatly influenced, through the quality of his blank verse and his conception of the tragic hero). Indeed Marlowe has given tragedy the magnificent instrument of his blank verse, which is always eloquent, if at times a little bombastic; and he has endowed tragedy with a sense of character, since his plays are structured around a central figure who is driven by an overwhelming passion that finally leads him to his death. When Shakespeare added to these qualities his own mastery of plot and his human sympathy, drama reached its greatest heights. (Indeed, Marlowe's contribution to structure — i.e., to the problem of how to build a plot and to present the action in a genuinely dramatic manner — was less impressive; also, since he did not respect the rules of the three unities of classical drama, he is sometimes called, just like Shakespeare, a romantic dramatist — as opposed to a classical dramatist.)

### **William Shakespeare (1564-1616)**

Shakespeare was a poet and a dramatist, for he wrote poems as well as plays (in both verse and prose). He was very much a man of his own time (of the Elizabethan age), but like Chaucer, he combined technical brilliance with a unique ability to render experience in poetic language and with a rare, intuitive understanding of the human psyche, which allowed him to write works whose validity transcends time. Yet it is important to note that Shakespeare depended on the work of his predecessors, even though he could transmute these sources. His work, then, was rooted in what others before him had begun; but at the same time he kept improving on what he and others had already offered — indeed he himself kept experimenting till his death.

Roughly speaking, his career can be divided into two periods: (1) his work under the reign of Queen Elizabeth (i.e., until 1603); (2) and then what he produced under the reign of James I (in what is known as the Jacobean period).<sup>47</sup>

### Under Elizabeth

In his early works (i.e., in his poems and his early plays) Shakespeare follows contemporary trends, in that he conforms to the fashions of the time in terms of both his choice of material and the forms and patterns that he uses.

1. His poetry. The **sonnet** is of course a fashionable form, very much a conventional one in Elizabethan poetry. Shakespeare followed the fashion, then, in as much as he wrote a sequence of sonnets; yet he transcended the fashion since some of his sonnets are addressed to a young man rather than to a cold and distant lady, while others are addressed to a lady but express disillusioned passion rather than simply admiration and praise. In fact he adapts the Petrarchan sonnet and its conventional mood to his own end, and to his own personal situation. Moreover, in his best sonnets he uses traditional comparisons and sophisticated images, but not just for the sake of decoration (as was mainly the case with the minor sonneteers of the period): Shakespeare revives old clichés with a view to expressing a profound moral vision, and universal truths about love, life, nature, and the power of art to transcend time and make transitory beauty eternal.

Besides his sequence of sonnets he also wrote two long narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, which deal with the kind of classical story which exerted so much appeal at the time.

2. His **Elizabethan comedies**. It is convenient to divide Shakespeare's comedies in this period into two categories, the farcical and the romantic. The **farces** were written in the early 1590s (*The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*) and emphasize the comic situation (rather than develop the characters who become entangled in it); they are full of the realistic laughter already present in the early English comedies, as produced by Udall or the author of *Gammer Gurton's Needle*. On the other hand, the **romantic comedies** focus on a character involved in a love intrigue. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, his first attempt at a romantic comedy, Shakespeare imitated Robert Greene, while in *Love's Labour's Lost* he parodies and satirises Lyly's affectation with regard to manners, style, and language. In these comedies individual

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<sup>47</sup> Here we anticipate on the next stage in Renaissance literature, its developments in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century under the Stuart dynasty.

characters assume greater importance and largely contribute to determine the direction of the plot, which revolves around a love story.

But Shakespeare rapidly comes to interweave the two types of comedy, and the characteristics of both farce and romantic comedy, in the mid-1590s, in the mixture of realism and magic fantasy to be found in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-96), which is the most lyrical of all the comedies. Here, the romantic element is present in the romantic lovers, but the unrealities of the romance are gently rebuked by reason, so that we have a fusion of farcical realism and the idealistic approach to love typical of the early romantic comedies.

In the late 1590s Shakespeare reaches the peak of his achievement as a comedy writer: in *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598-99), *As You Like It* (1599?) and *Twelfth Night* (1600) he achieves a perfect reconciliation of realism and romance —i.e., of the realistic laughter of classical comedy, based on a comic situation, on the one hand, and of the romantic conception of love viewed as a great ennobling emotion and a value in life, on the other. In these comedies the solemnity of love is relieved by the generosity of laughter, and the irresponsibility of laughter by the seriousness of love. The plays, clearly, deal with love and the psychology of lovers, and are full of the wild imbroglions typical of the farce. The most engaging characters in them are well-balanced young people, usually women (like Rosalind in *As You Like It*) who can live easily in each of both worlds, that of reality and that of fantasy, and who have enough common sense and sanity to see the funny side of their own romantic excesses.

*Twelfth Night* has been called the perfection of English comedy. The whole play is alive with humour and action. The skill in the changes from bright to dark, from gentle to severe, is matched by the skill in the arrangement of the verse and prose. Duke Orsino believes that he is in love with Lady Olivia, but he is more in love with love. 'If music be the food of love', he says at the beginning of the play, 'play on'. There are twins again (as in *The Comedy of Errors*), and they cause confusion when the girl dresses like her brother. Two knights, Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, provide amusement with their foolish plans and their drinking. The play contains several songs. Here is the clown's song in Act 5.

When that I was and a little tiny boy,  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
A foolish thing was but a toy,  
For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came to man's estate,



With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
'Gainst knaves and thieves men shut their gate,  
For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came, alas! to wive,  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
By swaggering could I never thrive,  
For the rain it raineth every day.

A great while ago the world begun,  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
But that's all one, our play is done,  
And we'll strive to please you every day.

These comedies of the late 1590s — except one, *The Merchant of Venice* — are called the **sunny comedies**, in contrast to the **dark comedies**, or problem plays, that he wrote in the next period. As to *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-97), it falls outside this categorisation, for it is a grave comedy sometimes performed as a tragedy nowadays, on account of the character of Shylock, the Jew, who was a figure of fun and evil in the Elizabethan age, but who tends to be viewed by our modern sensibility as a tragic character.

The plot of the play goes roughly as follows: Antonio, a merchant, borrows money from Shylock to help his friend Bassanio, who wants to marry the rich and beautiful Portia. Shylock hates Antonio and only agrees to lend the money on condition that, if it is not repaid at the right time, Antonio shall pay a pound of his flesh. When Antonio's ships are wrecked, and to everyone's surprise he cannot pay the money, Shylock demands his pound of flesh. The case is taken to court, and Antonio has no hope. Then suddenly Portia, dressed as a lawyer, appears in court. At first she tries to persuade Shylock to have mercy, but she does not succeed, even with the famous speech about mercy:

It [mercy] droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath; it is twice blessed:  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes  
'T is mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown.

Then Portia herself becomes hard: Shylock may have his flesh — but not one drop of blood, as there was nothing about blood in the agreement. Since Shylock cannot take the flesh without spilling some blood, Antonio is saved.

The story is nonsense — no one believes that living flesh can form part of an agreement at law — but the play is great. It is called a comedy even though Shylock is badly treated, so much so that he can be seen as the first great Shakespearian character, and perhaps also his first great tragic figure.

3. His **Elizabethan tragedies**. His career as a tragedy writer follows the same pattern, in that his main ambition at first was to learn, and he was willing to adapt himself to whatever models were then in vogue; but, once again, Shakespeare was able to digest all the materials, techniques and influences that he borrowed, and to give them a deeper, and a more universal, value.

First he wrote **history plays**, for the simple reason that they were the most popular type of drama in the 1590s, and the least difficult to construct (he started from the life and career of a king). Among the best are *Richard III* (1593) and *Richard II* (1595), in which he tried to recapture the harmonies and the eloquence of Marlowe's blank verse; then *Henry IV*, in which he shows a greater mastery and an ability to make the characters speak more naturally; and then *Henry V*, with its brilliant display of national pride about Henry's victory over the French at Agincourt in 1415, when he became the Regent of France.

Throughout the history plays Shakespeare had Holinshed's *Chronicles of English History*, as well as other such sources, close at hand as a record of events — although the interpretation of the facts is always his own. It is in these history plays that he presented the idea that only by loyalty could the state survive, and that this virtue of loyalty must be supremely the attribute of kingship: for this is the basic virtue from which order and peace can proceed, and without which chaos is likely to erupt. Consequently, rebellion is only justified in the work of Shakespeare in order to get rid of an evil king — i.e., one that is disloyal or cruel to his countrymen. Interestingly, this suggests that there is, already in Shakespeare, a budding sense of citizenship and of the responsibility of the ruler towards his people.

Apart from the history plays, most of which are tragedies, Shakespeare wrote 4 more tragedies before 1603, all of which belong, somehow or other, to the genre of the revenge tragedy (or the tragedy of blood) derived from Seneca and popularised in England by Kyd. A second influence that can be traced is the concept of the 'fall of Princes' as presented in *The Mirror for Magistrates* — i.e., the notion that the fall of kings is not due to fate, or to the wheel of fortune (perceived as an arbitrary and all-powerful force), but is caused by the character of the hero himself. Indeed Shakespeare,

in both his history plays and his tragedies, explores the relationship between character and destiny, which suggests the very modern idea that one may be responsible for one's own fate. A third influence is that of the English Morality play, albeit a secularised one, perceptible in Shakespeare's clear-cut distinction between good and evil, but also in his presentation of the tragic hero, in his very torment or conflict, as a prototype of humanity: however much they may be rooted in the real world, his tragic characters take on a universal meaning and are made representative of every man.

*Titus Andronicus* (1594) is an early and violent tragedy of revenge which, with *Richard III*, challenged the supremacy of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*.

*Romeo and Juliet* (1597), one of Shakespeare's early masterpieces, also has Senecan affinities in as much as Romeo, one of the main protagonists, is animated at one stage by a desire for revenge; but here the playwright refrains from stressing the horror of the bloody murders, and privileges instead the sense of pity evoked by the death of the two young lovers. The plot is based on a narrative poem by Arthur Brooke, itself based on an Italian tale by Bandello (1485-1561). But here again Shakespeare transforms the original material, introduces new characters, and altogether modifies the meaning of the traditional story. Under his pen it becomes a story of pure, irresistible but tragic love, in which the deaths of Romeo and Juliet result from the enmity separating their families. Yet, through their death, they bring about the reconciliation of the two families, and restore peace and order in Verona. To this extent they do not die in vain.

This early tragedy is famous for its beautiful poetry<sup>48</sup> and the dramatic excellence of some of its major scenes. Yet here the external element of fate, rather than an error or a tragic flaw in the nature of the heroes' character, is largely responsible for their death. (At this stage in his development, Shakespeare had not yet reached his own later conception of the tragic hero as someone who is led to his fall by a flaw in his own character, or by the corruption or the misuse of a personal quality.)

*Julius Caesar* (1599) also has Senecan characteristics, namely the ghost and the revenge motifs.

*Hamlet* (1600-01) is the first of Shakespeare's complex tragedies. The ingredients are again traditional ones, such as the play of revenge, the ghost, or the use of a play within the play; but the upshot is new and unexpected. The play explores the problem of action and the reflective mind: the keynote of the tragedy may be given by Hamlet as the crisis approaches: 'There is nothing either good or evil but thinking makes it so'. Indeed

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<sup>48</sup> The prologue and some of the lovers' speeches are shaped as sonnets.

certainty is a comfort only enjoyed by weak minds while Shakespeare shows that thought, with its many illuminations but also illusions, is the more relevant reality. As a consequence of thinking, the so-called certitudes and facts of the material and moral life vanish, and make room for doubts and hesitations. And even though Hamlet finally avenges the death of his father by killing Claudius (the uncle who murdered his father and then married his mother), he does so in the fire of anger and is struck by the horror of the crime.

#### Under James I (1603-25)

As we shall see, the Jacobean period was characterised by political, economic and religious problems which sharpened tensions, and brought out the contradictions that existed between the two main ideals of the Renaissance. Indeed, on the one hand the Renaissance promoted new ideas of unlimited individual passions and worldly ambitions, but on the other hand it also expressed a wish for ideal harmony and order. The balance between individual aspirations and the collective order, which had been precariously maintained under Elizabeth, was seriously undermined. As a result the Jacobean period was marked by disillusionment, by a questioning spirit and a mood of discontent, which contrasts with the enthusiasm, fantasy and national pride of the Elizabethan period. The turn taken by Shakespeare's later plays also illustrates this change.

1. The **comedies**. The new questioning spirit and the mood of social discontent are most noticeable in what have been called the **dark comedies**, or problem plays. In these, Shakespeare gives a grieved and angry satirical portrait of the new age. This criticism of the new age is apparent in *Troilus and Cressida* (1602), in which he gives an analysis of the disintegration of a heroic age, and in *All's Well that Ends Well* (1603-04), in which he idealized the elderly characters, who thus appear to embody and illustrate the disappearing virtues of the Elizabethan age. In *Measure for Measure* (1604), which is one of his most sociological plays, he presents an indictment of city government and of the court.

But the satirical, bitter and negative attitude and tone were probably not natural to Shakespeare, and though he seems, in the dark comedies, to have followed the trend of the time (as he had so often done), in fact the Jacobean disillusionment led him to reflect more deeply on the nature of evil — which is what he does in the great tragedies written in this period.

2. The **tragedies**. The first years of James I's reign saw the production of the three great tragedies *Othello* (1604), *Macbeth* (1605-06), and *King Lear* (1606). These plays stand apart from anything that preceded them, because of their assertion that the world is full of inscrutable yet absorbingly interesting forms of evil. They are different: 1) from the dark comedies (or problem plays) in that there is nothing here of the satirist who hates the world and attacks individuals he dislikes; 2) from *Hamlet*, in that there is a sense of objective evil, not related to the character's thoughts and feelings.

Shakespeare now explores man's complex relationship with the forces of evil, and the tragic heroes are embodiments of a spiritual disease that threatens to poison the whole universe. The three tragedies further share the following characteristics:

1) Each portrays some noble figure (not a villain) caught in a difficult situation, when he has to make a choice and consequently experiences a moral conflict which reveals a weakness or a bias in his nature — a weakness that finally leads him to his fall. Upon his actions depends not only his own fate, but that of an entire nation (except in *Othello*, which is a more private or domestic kind of tragedy even though the Moor is a military leader, so a very public figure.).

2) While our attention is directed at some central action, Shakespeare portrays the whole world in which the hero moves.

3) Another characteristic is that these plays, complex as they may be, can appeal to different audiences, the courtier as well as the man of the street, for they offer many things at different levels of intelligence: either the level of action, or that of moral and psychological investigation (with various degrees of sophistication), or else that of the poetic and symbolic patterning of the play.

4) Another characteristic of all Shakespeare's tragedies is that they are non-classical, for a) he mixes prose and verse; b) he shamelessly involves characters belonging to the nobility in comic plots; c) he uses comic scenes (often written in prose) in these tragedies, so that there is a mixture of tones and of genres; d) he does not respect the classical rules of the three unities (time, place, action or plot), and this is why he is called a romantic.<sup>49</sup>

In *Othello*, which is often called a tragedy of jealousy, Shakespeare explores the paradoxes of good and evil, as well as the irony that evil can be bred out of innocence.

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<sup>49</sup> Be careful that the word 'romantic', as used in these pages, can have different meanings. When it refers to the content of the works (as in the sunny comedies) the term means that the play is set in a dream-world and explores the nature and value of young romantic love; on the other hand, when it refers to form (as in the tragedies), it points to the liberties taken with the usual classical exigencies.

Othello, a romantic and noble man of action, kills his wife Desdemona not so much out of jealousy as because he is tortured by the anguish that his beautiful and innocent-looking wife, whom he dearly loves, could be guilty of loving somebody else. This is what Iago, the cold-blooded realist, finally succeeds in making Othello believe — and wrongly so, for Desdemona has remained faithful to her husband. Indeed Iago's aim is to destroy the triumph of innocence, as it is symbolized for him by the great love of Othello and Desdemona. For Iago, the success of their love (their happiness) is an impossibility: in his scheme of things you need cunning to be successful and get on in the world. For Othello, who is not a philosopher like Hamlet, but a man of action, something must be done, for his moral world is shattered (since he believes Iago's insinuations), and the only action that seems proper in the circumstances is to kill Desdemona. He thus kills her, in a way, to preserve the integrity of his own moral universe. (Naturally, he discovers the truth when it is too late, and then kills himself.) This tragedy voices the compelling and contradictory emotions experienced by Othello: his powerful love but also his misery and his fury that his beautiful and loving wife might not be what she *seems* (the tragic irony being of course that she is).

Among Shakespeare's tragedies *King Lear* is probably the one where elemental human urges are most directly exposed and related to primeval forces in nature. Lear is a study in selfishness and greed. His weakness is his openness to flattery. He gives his kingdom to the two evil daughters who flatter him, and nothing to the youngest girl, who tells the truth but loves him best. The play explores the destructive nature of evil, and the limits to the world-regenerating power of love and generosity. Lear eventually achieves self-knowledge through suffering, but the conditions of his learning are so hard that he does so at the cost of his reason. Lear is not redeemed until he finally loses his pride and learns to see through deceptive appearances.

The play is full of archetypal images and ideas which combine and reverberate to produce a large and cosmic view of man's fate, together with the individual tragedies of the characters, Lear and his daughters and Gloucester and his sons. It is a poetic drama that can be read on a grand symbolic level, but also as offering sharp insight into ordinary human psychology.

*Macbeth* presents the progress of evil within a human personality. It is a study of two 'good' characters, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, whose finest quality (their mutual love) becomes the means of their ruin under the influence of evil ambition — Macbeth wants to become king and he and his wife therefore conspire to eliminate the legitimate

monarch of Scotland. Macbeth is first presented as a sensitive and able man, but his obsessive desire to become king leads him to do what he knows to be evil, and what his whole nature at first shrinks from. The point is that he has to commit further crimes to keep the crown once he has secured it; and Shakespeare shows that one dimension of crime is that once you start you must go on. Finally, the real tragedy of Macbeth lies in his discovery of the meaninglessness of his ambition, almost as soon as it is achieved: so that he is condemned to carry on and to pay the price over and over again, for what he knows to be worthless. At the end, the former noble man is left with nothing but physical courage to fight against the forces of good — and of course he is eventually defeated, and rightful order is restored.

Beside these three masterpieces, Shakespeare also wrote two more Roman plays (after *Julius Caesar*): *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607), and *Coriolanus* (1607-08).

3. The last plays (or **romances**). Between 1609 and 1612 he wrote what have been called the last plays or the romances, among them *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. Again these have certain characteristics in common:

- 1) They reflect a new attitude to both life and art, since they all deal, one way or another, with evil and innocence, guilt and atonement, uncorrupted youth and innocence undoing the evils committed in the past and starting life afresh.
- 2) They contain elements of mythology, folklore and magic: Shakespeare here creates a symbolic world (as opposed to the 'real' Denmark of *Hamlet* or the 'real' Venice of *Othello*) in which innocence can triumph and the gods enable some evil to be undone. He thus no longer analyses directly the tragic paradoxes of human nature, and he turns away from the psychological realism of the great tragedies, towards a larger poetic symbolism which reveals the moral patterns and possibilities of human life.

Again, in these last plays he finds a way of at least partially undoing evil, and this is achieved by a ritual of redemption, or regeneration, of which *The Tempest* is a good example.

*The Tempest* handles the theme of forgiveness. Early on in the play, the action is removed from the ordinary world and shifted onto a magic island where Prospero, a kind of god, controls everything with his supernatural powers. This makes *The Tempest* a magical play full of grave beauty and rich poetry, a play of wish-fulfilment in which

virtue is uppermost and innocence can triumph. The island is a sort of garden of Eden, with Prospero, personally in charge and all-powerful, preventing evil from prevailing. Yet, at the end of the play, Miranda (the heroine of the younger generation) is about to leave the shelter of her Paradise, and to go and test her virtue in the great wicked world. Indeed it seems necessary to go back to civilization — to the human world as it is, with its many imperfections and temptations — for this is where human beings belong, and there might be a form of glory even in the tragic paradoxes of the human condition.

A speech in this play seems to show that Shakespeare had decided to write no more. Here is part of it:

Our revels are now ended. These our actors  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air...  
We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

By means of conclusion on Shakespeare, a word on his style and language might be necessary. Shakespeare began his career as a poet, and he never ceased to be fascinated by the poetic possibilities of language. In the course of time, his use of a rhetorical blank verse influenced by Marlowe (as in *Richard III*, for instance) gave way to the lyrical musicality of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and was then further enriched in the great tragedies. Concentration of poetic force could not be carried further than in the blank verse of *Macbeth* and in that of the other great tragedies written between 1603 and 1609. In the following passage, Macbeth is contemplating the murder of his sovereign, relative and guest, King Duncan (I.vii):

If it were done — when 'tis done — then 'twere well  
It were done quickly: if th'assassination  
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch,  
With his surcease, success; that but this blow  
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,  
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,  
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases  
We still have judgement here; that we but teach  
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return  
To plague th'inventor; this even-handed justice  
Commends th'ingredients of our poison'd chalice  
To our own lips. He's here in double trust:  
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,  
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,  
Who should against the murtherer shut the door,  
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan  
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been



So clear in his great office, that his virtues  
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against  
The deep damnation of his taking-off;  
And Pity, like a naked new-born babe,  
Striding the blast, or heaven's Cherubins, hors'd  
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,  
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,  
That tears shall drown the wind.—I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself  
And falls on th'other—

While Marlowe's distinguishing figure of speech is the hyperbole, Shakespeare's is the metaphor. Macbeth considers how his crime will be perceived. The virtues of his victim will make the murder particularly shocking, and Shakespeare does not merely describe that state of horror, but enacts it. The tender child-like emotion of pity will be like a force of nature, striking like the wind on every individual. Then pity is heightened to the angels of God riding the winds as messengers of divine vengeance. Strong wind makes the eyes smart and water; so pity will be so great that it will overwhelm horror. Shakespeare thus uses the image of wind three times, but by twice using synonyms — 'blast', 'couriers of the air' — he obliterates the repetition and conveys the storm of horror, compassion and indignation which Macbeth's horrified imagination calls up to mind. Macbeth now sums up his own position by comparing it with both a horseman and a horse: a horse needs a spur to urge him on, and so does he, but his spur is only that of excessive ambition that will bring ruin on himself — i.e., horror at the murder will annul the value of the fruits of the crime — just as an over-eager horseman will leap over a horse's back instead of on it. This last image is confused, but it is confused with dramatic intention: so far in the play, Macbeth has moved as though hypnotized by the urgency of his desire for power, but at this moment his reason is trying to recover control: he is both the horse *and* the rider.

For Shakespeare, language was not only expressive but also cognitive (a means of knowing) and exploratory. Indeed he put his great poetic gift at the service of his equally great dramatic gift: he combined the supreme craftsmanship of the man of the theatre, a humane curiosity about man and the human condition, an extraordinary ability to conceive and create character, and an unrivalled mastery of the English language.

With his largeness of view and his flexibility of technique, he worked in the popular dramatic tradition of his time and produced an English poetic drama which developed its

own kind of form and unity, and owed nothing to rules or to any external doctrine of correctness.

(Other contemporary dramatists such as Ben Jonson or John Webster are introduced in the first section of the next course on History of English literature.)