

英国文学史纲

范存忠 著

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A B r i e f H i s t o r y o f E n g l i s h L i t e r a t u r e

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

英国文学史纲 = A Brief History of English Literature:
英汉对照 / 范存忠著. —南京: 译林出版社, 2015.11
(范存忠文集)
ISBN 978-7-5447-5712-6

I. ①英… II. ①范… III. ①英国文学-文学史-英汉
IV. ①I561.09

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字 (2015) 第192290号

书 名	英国文学史纲
作 者	范存忠
责任编辑	许 昆
出版发行	凤凰出版传媒股份有限公司 译林出版社
出版社地址	南京市湖南路1号A楼, 邮编: 210009
电子邮箱	yilin@yilin.com
出版社网址	http://www.yilin.com
经 销	凤凰出版传媒股份有限公司
印 刷	南京爱德印刷有限公司
开 本	718毫米×1000毫米 1/16
印 张	25.5
插 页	4
字 数	260千
版 次	2015年11月第1版 2015年11月第1次印刷
书 号	ISBN 978-7-5447-5712-6
定 价	59.00元

译林版图书若有印装错误可向出版社调换
(电话: 025-83658316)

再版序言

《英国文学史纲》原是范存忠先生在 1954 年至 1955 年期间,在南京大学为英国语言文学专业英国文学课程撰写的英文讲授提纲。这部教材在英语界影响很大,同行们一致认为是一部简明扼要并具有特色的好教材,有些兄弟院校还将其翻印作为教材。为了使更多的英语爱好者受益,1981 年,范先生采纳了同行们的建议,着手将这本教学提纲整理为英文专著,于 1983 年由四川人民出版社正式出版。为了便于更多的读者阅读,对范先生的英文版本添加了中文翻译。

范先生这本专著的一个特点就是把英国各个时期的代表作家和代表作品,放在其特定的历史和社会条件下进行考察,站在哲学、历史和社会学的高度来剖析,不只是讨论作家的文学成就,而是进而指出他们在当时的社会意义和历史局限性。这对英语专业的学生和英国文学爱好者去深入了解作家的创作背景,以及去分析和理解文学作品有着很大的帮助。正如范先生自己所指出的那样:“英国文学史是英国人民的文学史,这个课程就从这个观点来讲述它的发展,重点讨论揭露社会现实,反映人民群众的情感、思想和意愿,而对社会起进步作用的大作

家与大作品,从而说明这份文学遗产在社会发展中的作用及其一定的局限性。”

范先生这本专著的另一个特点就是它别具一格的文体。英国文学的发展,从英国古诗《贝尔武甫》到萧伯纳的戏剧,纵横几千年的历史,范先生提纲挈领,在短短的 12 章里,将每个时期的文学代表人物和作品、其文学贡献,及在各自时期的历史和社会意义,剖析得清清楚楚。他的语言不仅简明扼要、深入浅出,而且生动有趣、引人入胜。

在译林出版社的努力下,范先生这本《英国文学史纲》重新再版了,作为范存忠先生的家属,我们感到由衷的高兴。我们衷心希望范存忠先生的这本专著,能对更多的英语专业学生和英国文学爱好者,有所裨益。

范家宁 王英

2014 年 7 月

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CHAPTER I

ENGLISH LITERATURE TO THE TIME OF CHAUCER

I Old English Poetry: *Beowulf*

1. Literature, Oral and Written The earliest literature of the English people, like that of any other people, was not written, but oral. Stories and legends passed from mouth to mouth and were enlarged and improved with each telling. The people participated in the making of this literature.

Naturally, such stories or legends were retold by those who could tell them best—and so each group came to have its own special storyteller called a *scôp*, which meant a Shaper or Maker of Songs. For it was in song, in a sort of chant, that these stories were told; any good story seemed the better for being sung or chanted. The *scôp* (i.e. poet) and also the gleeman (i.e. reciter) occupied honoured places in tribal and feudal society.

In early Saxon England, the *scôps* sang songs of the heroic deeds of their people. They improved on the stories with each telling, and sometimes weaved several different stories into a long narrative. Passed

on for generations by word of mouth from one scôp to another, these stories came at last to be written down. But only a fraction of what had been produced was written down, and only a fraction of what was written down has been preserved. The longest and finest of extant Old English poems is "Beowulf", which has been called the national epic of the English people.

2. Story of *Beowulf* *Beowulf* is a tale of adventure, a tale of marvels. Beowulf, the hero, is a Geat, in the southern part of Sweden. He is a champion, a slayer of monsters. He hears that the people of Denmark have suffered from the attacks of a monster by the name of Grendel, who visits night after night the king's hall and carries away the sleeping warriors. With fourteen companions, he sets out for Denmark and offers to fight Grendel. In a terrible hand-to-hand struggle at night, Beowulf tears off an arm of the monster, who is mortally wounded and flees to his den beneath the sea.

This is the end of Grendel; but Grendel's mother comes to avenge her son. She renews attacks on the hall. Beowulf runs after her and follows her to a cave underneath the rushing waters of a dusty lake. There he meets her in combat. With a magic sword left by the giants of olden times, he hews off the monster's head. There, too, he finds the body of Grendel himself, and cuts off his head as well. He goes back to the Danish hall with the two hairy heads as trophies. The triumph is celebrated in feasting and song.

Beowulf goes home. He becomes king and reigns over his people for fifty years. Then it comes to pass that a fire dragon, stirred up from his long sleep, sets out to burn with his flaming fire everything that lies in

his path. Beowulf, an old man now, fights the dragon single-handed. The dragon is killed, but Beowulf is mortally wounded in the combat. The poem ends with the funeral of the old hero and the lament of the people:

So they mourned — the Geat people —
His hearth comrades, bewailing their lords;
Declared that he was of all kings on earth
The mildest of men, and aye the gentlest,
Kind to his people, craving most a good name.

3. Life and Manners Reflected in *Beowulf* The matter of *Beowulf* is a folk legend brought to England by the Teutonic tribes from their continental homes. The poem as we have it was composed between 700 and 800 by an English poet. It reflects the life and manners of many centuries from tribalism to early feudalism.

The main stories — the fights with Grendel, with Grendel's mother, and with the dragon — are evidently folk legends of primitive Teutonic tribes. Such tribes, as we have learned, lived along the northeastern coast of Europe from the mouth of the Rhine to the peninsula of Jutland. Back of their little settlements were almost impenetrable forests. In front of them was the stormy North Sea. They had to fight against the beasts. They had to struggle against the forces of nature, which remained mysterious and unknown. When they returned from their exploits and voyages, the warriors would tell stories of strange monsters that lived beneath the sea, or in the marshes and dark forests inland. They were brave; but they were terror-haunted. Such is the background of the marvellous stories.

But *Beowulf* is by no means a poem that reflects only primitive ages. It was written down in England when Christianity had been introduced—when English society was well on its way to feudalism. It reflects, too, the spirit of English life of the 7th and 8th centuries, presenting a blending of old folk ways with new, a welding of tribal heroism with feudal ideals. The ideal of gentleness is united to strength, and valour ennobled by virtue. The favourite theme of *Beowulf* poet is the loyalty of the thane to the lord. The thanes live in close relation to their lord. The lord leads and protects them among unneighbourly neighbours, and they fight and die for him. Feud and treachery, murder of kindred and usurpation are condemned as they were condemned in Saxon England of the 8th century.

Beowulf is a tale of tribal society retold in the dawn of feudalism. Beowulf the hero is more than a tribal chief; he is the embodiment of knighthood.

4. Language and Poetic Form The Old English language differs in many ways from Modern English. It is a language of strong stresses and many consonants. It is highly inflectional. Like Modern German or Modern Russian, it depends for its meaning on the endings of words rather than on the positions of words. Moreover, Old English is rich in synonyms, most of them being compound words of the kind that are met with in Modern German. There are, for instance, numerous terms for the sea or ocean; e.g. “seal-bath”, “whale-path”, “swan-road”.

The basis of Old English verse is alliteration — i. e. the use of words beginning with the same consonant. Normally, each line contains four stresses, with a pause between the second and the third, thus dividing the

line into two parts. Usually the first three stresses, or often two, of which one is always the third, are alliterative; e.g.

Steap stanhlitho — stige nearwe.

(Steep stone-slopes — paths narrow.)

Tha com of more under mist-hleoþum

Grendel gongan; godes yrre bar.

(There came from the moor under the mist-clouds

Grendel going; God's ire he bore.)

The verse seems to us harsh and monotonous, but probably it was not. We cannot recall the sound of the original recital by the singer (*scôp* or gleeman) of the early days, as it fell on the ears of the young warriors in their lord's banquet hall.

II Old English Prose: Bede and Alfred

1. Bede and His *Ecclesiastical History* Bede (673—735) was reared in the monastery at Jarrow. He learned all that could be learned as a scholar, and had forty works, all in Latin, to his credit. His most well-known work is *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written in Latin and later translated into English.

Ecclesiastical History tells us more about early English life than any other work. It reviews the first conquests and settlements, the struggles

of the little kingdoms, pagan and Christian, the coming of the Roman mission, the founding of the monasteries and the new culture. It abounds in impossible miracles and marvels of the credulous, but it contains as well charming pictures of the life and manners of his age. Among the most often quoted passages is the account about the poet Caedmon.

Caedmon was a cowherd, an untutored man. He was well on in his humble life, and at merry gatherings was unable to sing and play like everyone else. Often he had slunk home in shame. One night he took refuge in a familiar stable. He fell asleep, when there appeared to him a stranger, saying:

“Caedmon, sing me something.”

“I don’t know how,” answered Caedmon, “and that is just why I left the table and came out here — because I couldn’t sing.”

Quick the answer, “Nay, but for me you have a song.”

“What am I to sing?”

“Sing the beginning of all creatures.”

And upon the word Caedmon all of himself began to sing verses in praise of God the Creator which he had never heard before. And so Caedmon became a poet. People said, “Heavenly grace had been conferred upon him by the Lord.”

This vision of the cowherd is a characteristic attempt in early ages to explain the source of poetic inspiration. Similar legends occur in many lands and many literatures.

2. King Alfred and *Old English Chronicle* Alfred (849—899)

was a good soldier and a remarkable scholar. For seven years he offered resistance to the Danes and succeeded in consolidating the kingdom of Wessex. For the education of his people, he had a number of Latin works translated into English. He prepared English versions of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, that his people might know their own past. To the same end he renewed and set going *Old English Chronicle* — a memorandum year by year of English events up to 1154 by later scholars.

The early part of *Chronicle* has no historical perspective: eclipses, comets, earthquakes and poor harvests rank as of equal importance with social and political events. But after 755 the *Chronicle* begins to convey a better sense of reality. Especially remarkable are the records of Alfred's resistance to the Danes. A few short specimens are given below:

A. D. 875. That summer King Alfred went out to sea with a fleet, and fought against the forces of seven ships, and one of them he took, and put the rest to flight.

A. D. 897. ... King Alfred commanded long ships to be built to oppose the "ashes" (Danish ships). They were full twice as long as the others; some had sixty oars, and some had more; they were both swifter and steadier, and also higher than the others. They were shaped neither like the Frisian nor the Danish, but so as it seemed to him they would be most efficient.

A. D. 901. This year died Alfred ... He was king over the whole English nation, except that part which was under the dominion of the Danes, and he held the kingdom one year and a half less than thirty years. And then Edward, his son, succeeded to the kingdom.

The style of *Old English Chronicle* is simple, primitive, often repetitious and awkward, but at times it exhibits an elemental vigour. In the works of Alfred, we mark the beginning of English prose literature.

III Chivalry and Romance

1. Feudalism, Chivalry and Romance Feudalism, which had begun in late Saxon England, was strengthened and became more elaborate after the Norman Conquest. A new social hierarchy came into being: the feudal lords with the king at the top; the knights; the vassals; and at the bottom the villeins or serfs.

The knights were central figures in that society. They were pledged to do military service for their lords. In time of war, they would come riding in their armour and with their swords and lances, and with vassals, their bowmen, following them. In time of peace, they would arrange tournaments, in which they would compete with each other. This was known as knighthood.

But the knight should not only be loyal to his lord, and brave in combat, but also be exalted in sentiments and devoted to a lady. The love-cult originated in Italy and France as a revolt against monastic asceticism. The alliance of the knighthood of the north with the love-cult of the south produced an institution known as chivalry.

The institution of chivalry gave rise to an immense body of literature

known as metrical romance, which arose in France in the course of the 12th century. French romance had two themes — prowess in arms and fantastic love. Much of it was written in England under the patronage of Norman queens and the Anglo-Norman aristocracy. Later, romance came to be written in English, but nearly all English romances were derived from French sources.

Of the romantic stories, some are about Greek and Roman warriors (e.g. Alexander the Great), some about the French king Charlemagne and his followers, some about ancient Britain. The best of all romantic stories are those associated with the name of Arthur, a legendary king of ancient Britain. They are known as Arthurian romances.

2. Language and Poetic Form During the two hundred years after the Norman Conquest, the English language underwent tremendous changes. The old inflections — alterations in the forms of words to show their relation to the rest of the sentence — began to die away. A synthetic language gradually became analytic. In vocabulary, it assimilated thousands of French words, colourful and sonorous. The bone and joints of the language, the frame and structure, remained English; but the loan-words gave it fullness, diversity and the grace of French song.

Under the French influence, a new verse form came into vogue. The alliterative metre of Anglo-Saxon verse gradually gave way to intricate patterns of rhyme and assonance. The regular form of verse, especially in the romances, was the eight-syllable or four-stressed rhymed couplet — the common metre of Old French poetry. As to alliteration, it ceased to be regular, though a few romances continued to be written in that measure. But it was different from the old metre, because the language had