

ENGLISH

简明英国文学史

A CONCISE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

李增 / 主编



东北师范大学出版社

Northeast Normal University Press

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Forward



The idea of compiling a history of English literature emerged in my senior composition class of more than twenty years ago. An American professor assigned a topic to us as to “What Dream You Want to Fulfill in the Future”. Somehow I wrote the idea into the composition, though by then I had only read two books of English literary history, one by Professor Chen Jia and the other by Professor Liu Bingshan. Now when I look back at the idea I realize that it was too ambitious, deriving from a childish impulse rather than a rational consideration. However, I remember I took the assignment with such sincerity and affection that the composition turned out to win a high appraisal from the professor.

After graduation, the idea faded from my memory due to the heavy teaching and research work. Although I had been teaching the course of English literature, I almost completely forgot that dream. Occasionally, the idea flashed into my mind, but it was soon overwhelmed by the other important sundry duties.

With the arrival of the twenty-first century, perhaps because of the increasing age, the idea was revived so strongly that it was hard to impel it from my mind. It was just at this time that the Northeast Normal University Press came to me and asked if I could compile a history of English literature with the undergraduates of English major as the main target. I suddenly realized it was a golden chance which I couldn't afford to lose. Instantly, three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, had governed my mind: the longing for illuminating my accumulated experiences over the years, the search for a different and better textbook to facilitate my literature teaching, and the unbearable pity for my long-buried youth dream. Therefore I accepted the task without any hesitation or reserve, though at once I felt greater pressure and challenge.

Over twenty years ago, only two books of English literary history were available to the students of English major. But nowadays, dozens of books of this type in various styles have flooded into the market, and there are still more to come. And the books written by foreign authors are not difficult to find. In such a situation, to compile a new book which differs largely from those previous ones will surely become a very difficult and complex task. However, I have managed to work out some principles or features which might distinguish the book from the others.

First, it is intended mainly to meet the needs of undergraduate students who either

want to get a quick glimpse at what has been going on in the development of English literature or want prepare themselves for the graduate entrance examination.

Second, it adopts a different way of dividing chapters. Instead of the traditional division of juxtaposing historical periods and literary events, the book divides into chapters solely in accordance with the specific historical periods within which specific literary events take place, aiming at establishing a closer and more relevant link between history and literature and emphasizing the corresponding relationship of them.

Third, concision will be the goal of the pursuit. England enjoys a long history of literature, covering various movements and numerous writers of varied styles. Moreover, within the short span of forty hours (one semester) teachers and students will find much more difficulty in handling all of them. So selection becomes indispensable. In compiling the book, the author has only chosen those long-canonized writers and works as the main content of narration. Thus, the book has been deliberately made more concise and accessible. The students who want to pursue a further study can broaden their scope just on this base and who do not will also find that their need of building a knowledge structure for an English major is accommodated.

The draft of the book has been in use in classroom for several semesters at Northeast Normal University and received some revisions. For the completion of this book I owe many thanks.

My immense gratitude goes first to those Chinese precursors of this field, such as Professor Chen Jia, Professor Wang Zuoliang, Professor Yang Zhouhan, Professor Liu Bingshan, whose pioneering spirit and inauguratory work have not only inspired me in taking up this project, but also enriched the book in the form of loaned information.

Equally considerable is my debt to those English and American authors of literary history, whose writings with learning and insight have been the sources of my courage in exploring literature as a reflection of the social life and human experience. This debt can be never fully released in the "References".

I am also thankful to my colleagues, Mr. Liu Guoqing, Mr. Chen Yanxu, Mr. Liu Yingjie and Mr. Huo Shengya, who kindly contributed their share of Chapter Three, Chapter Five, Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight respectively.

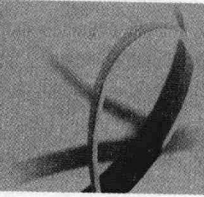
Special acknowledgments should be given to Tom Almond, English senior lecturer of literature, and Dr. Todd Burdick, American teacher of literature who have been kind and generous enough to help revise and proofread the manuscript.

Finally, I also wish to express my appreciation for the constant and thoughtful support from the staff of the Northeast Normal University Press, particularly my editor, Mr. Wei Kun. Without their untiring efforts the book might never have come forth.

Li Zeng

Oct. 20, 2007

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Chapter One

English Literature from the Sixth Century to 1066

I . Historical Contexts

In the ancient British Isles lived the Celts, who came from northern Europe, and moved to the British Isles about 600 B. C. One of the Celtic branches was called Britons. Britons lived in tribes and shared a similar speech, custom and religion. Their culture belonged to early Iron Age.

From the first century to the eighth century, Roman armies came to invade Britain and finally conquered it, making it a province or a "colony" of the Roman Empire. Then Roman culture began to be introduced to Britain and spread throughout it. Roman conquerors built roads and towns (London was one of them). The consequence of the conquering was double; on one hand Britons were enslaved by the conquerors; but on the other hand Roman culture left some marks on that of Britons.

In the early fifth century, the Roman troops withdrew from Britain due to the domestic disturbances and attacks from the German tribes. Thereafter the Roman occupation of Britain came to an end.

The space left by the Roman troops was soon filled up by Germanic tribes in the mid-fifth century. Angles, Saxons and Jutes were three major tribes and were from western Denmark and the northwest coast of Germany. After they settled down in Britain, they established some kingdoms, by treating Britons as slaves and driving other Celtic natives to the north and west; Wales, Scotland and Ireland. According to the legend, the Celtic King Arthur led his knights in fighting against these invaders heroically and tragically.

During the sixth and seventh centuries, the kingdoms set up by Germanic invaders often fought each other to gain more land. By the seventh century, seven kingdoms emerged out of the fighting. These kingdoms often launched

wars against one another. The wars on one hand brought disasters to the society and sufferings to people, but on the other hand, they promoted the fusion of different cultures and the union of different kingdoms as one nation. Different tribes gradually merged into one nation, called English, and different dialects developed into one language, called Anglo-Saxon, or Old English. Almost all the important works of old English literature were in Old English.

Before the Anglo-Saxons came to Britain, they were in the final period of tribal society. The society was organized in tribes with the chiefs as the rulers. Since they settled in Britain, their tribal society had gradually broken up. Especially when the seven kingdoms emerged in the seventh century, the feudalism began to take into shape. The kings, the princes and the lords stayed at the top as the ruling class and the thanes, the freemen stayed at the lower level as the middle class, while slaves or bondsmen stayed at the lowest level as the ruled class.

In the late eighth century, the Danes, or the Vikings, came to invade England. Thereafter the attacks continued for over a century. However, their attempt to occupy the whole England was foiled by English people, King Alfred the Great in particular, who defeated the Danes and forced them to sign the Treaty of Wedmore in 878, thus rescuing London from Danes' hands. But in the early eleventh century, the Danes fought back again and this time they successfully occupied some places of England and stayed there for over twenty years. They were not driven out of England until the coming of the Normans who also ended the Anglo-Saxon Age.

The Anglo-Saxons were heathen people when immigrated to England and only worshipped the gods of northern Europe. But in 597 A. D. St. Augustine led a group of Christian missionaries to England from Rome and soon started Christianization. Churches, monasteries and abbeys were built and religious institutions set up. One century later, Christianity predominated over all England. The establishment of Christianity in England played an inestimable role in English history and literature. However in its early stage, the heathen concepts mixed with Christian ones and this could be clearly seen in the literary works of the Anglo-Saxon Age.

II. Literary Overview

Even since the Anglo-Saxons settled in England, English literature had begun. They brought their own culture and literature to England. Both common people and educated people joined in producing literature of the time. The literature of the Anglo-Saxon Age were mainly based on historical events or Germanic legends and mainly existed in oral form. The major genre was poetry. There were professional narrators or singers known as “scops” or “gleemen” who told or sang stories for entertainment. Scops were poet singers who created and sang poetic tales by themselves, while gleemen narrated epic tales created by others. They were often priests at first and then they became minstrels, traveling and singing from one place to another.

The English poems of this period revealed a newborn mixture of the cultures, namely, pagan culture and Christian culture. This new kind of culture was typically represented in Bede's *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and King Alfred's works.

The old English poetry is usually divided into two types: the heroic poetry from Germanic myths and history, and the Christian poetry. Most of these poems have particular historic and cultural values nowadays. They not only reflect the people's views of nature and society but also possess certain artistic qualities.

Beowulf is a poem of the first type. As the first and oldest English national epic, it portrays a half-historical and half-legendary Anglo-Saxon hero—Beowulf and tells his adventures. At first the epic existed orally and was not written down probably until the tenth century by a Christian poet.

Besides *Beowulf*, there are some other short and even incomplete narrative poems and lyrical poems which describe the life of Anglo-Saxon people, such as *Seafarer*, *The Lover's Message*, and *The Wife's Complaint*.

The second type of poetry, Christian poetry is represented by Caedmon and Cynewulf. Caedmon's poems deal mostly with the stories in the Bible, while Cynewulf's poems are more based on the legends about the lives of the Christian

saints. His best-known poem *The Dream of the Road* is regarded as the first poem of dream vision, which became popular in the Middle English literature.

Old English prose also makes up an indispensable and significant part of Anglo-Saxon literature. Bede was given the title of “Father of English History” for his *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and King Alfred was given the title of “Father of English Prose” for his translating Latin works into English and compiling *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

III. *Beowulf*

Of the earliest poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Age, *Beowulf* is the most famous literary work, and the oldest existent national epic in English literature. The manuscript of this poem in Wessex dialect dated back to the tenth century. The epic consisting of 3 182 lines was composed in alliterative verse. The poem took the Roman epic *The Aeneid* as the example, and combined pagan oral literature with Christian elements, describing folk legends of the northern tribes of the European Continent, and Scandinavian historical events.

The epic is about the hero Beowulf's three adventures, each of which involves a fight between Beowulf and his adversary in form of a monster, she-monster, and a fire dragon.

While *Beowulf* tells a story of the adventures of the heroic figure Beowulf, it presents a vivid picture of how the people in the Anglo-Saxon Age struggle against the hostile forces of the natural world. The epic mingles myths with heroic legends that can be interpreted as the conquering of the hostile forces of nature with the virtues of perseverance, bravery and physical strength. The poem tells about ideal kings and warriors as well. For an ideal king, he should have a strong sense of duty to protect his people and to make his people happy; for a warrior, he should possess the basic virtues, such as strength, courage, and loyalty to the king. Beowulf is such an ideal king because of his wisdom, strength, and sacrificing spirit for his people.

Beowulf is a work of distinctive artistic qualities. It is no wonder that it becomes the main representation of the achievement of the Anglo-Saxon

literature.

The epic adopts a structure common in early heroic epics. It contains a prologue and two parts telling three adventures. Two common epic methods are frequently employed—predicting and recalling. The story not only reflects the nature of the tribal society in which the characters live but also comprises some feudal elements.

The most striking fact of the poem is that it contains both pagan spirit and Christian spirit. The pagan spirit is manifested in the power of “Wyrd” (fate), bloody revenge and the praise. The Christian spirit is shown in portrayal of Beowulf who may remind people of the image of Jesus Christ. “God” and “Lord” are recurring words in the poem and act as the agents of promoting justice. Some other characters may allude to Biblical images, Grendel to Cain, the fire dragon to Satan. Beowulf’s victory may be understood as one of good over evil.

In describing characters and events, narratives and comments are used together so that characterization gains a certain depth and vividness. Beowulf is portrayed from multiple sides. Beowulf is a national hero with courage and honesty, ready to fight for his people. He is dignified and elegant, being familiar with the nobles and the rules of the court. But he is proud and wants to get fame and praise.

Since the epic was composed in Old English, the archaic words, complicated grammar and the idiomatic expressions abound in the poem and look quite strange to contemporary people.

One of its stylistic features is the use of metaphors, understatements and euphemism. For example, “whale-path” means the “sea”; “victory’s bestower” represents the “God”; “spear fighter” represents a soldier. Examples of understatements are: “sword-play” for wars; an example of euphemism is “sleeping”, “leaving life’s feast”, “choosing God’s light” which mean “death”.

The poem is famous for the use of alliteration. In each line, there are generally four stressed syllables. Often two or three stresses alliterate with one another. The use of alliteration was a popular technique of creating rhythm in Old English poems before Chaucer introduced rhymes into English poetry, and it constitutes an important part of English poetic tradition.

IV. The Old English Prose Writings

The Old English prose began from the latter part of the Anglo-Saxon Period. It was written in Latin, sometimes known as Anglo-Latin works. In the Anglo-Saxon Period, most prose works were on religious themes. Among the early prose writers, the Venerable Bede and King Alfred were two most famous representatives. Bede's prose works represented the achievement of the seventh and eighth century, while King Alfred's represented that of the ninth and tenth century. Their achievements had something to do with the cultural prosperity of the places where they came from: Northumbria and Wessex.

1. Bede (673—735)

Bede was born in 673 A. D. and was brought up in a monastery where he learned to speak and write in Latin and developed a strong love for books and knowledge. He became an abbot first and a priest later. He spent his life in the monastery of St. Paul by engaging himself in the religious services and writings.

As a versatile writer, his works in Latin touched on various subjects such as grammar, and criticism, biblical issues, sermons and saint's lives. The main intention of writings was to spread Christianity and develop the English church. His works were introduced to Europe and enjoyed a large readership there for centuries.

His masterpiece is *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. It was published in 631 and then was translated into Anglo-Saxon by King Alfred in 891. It is both a historical document and a literary work. As the historical document it records events—such as the Roman conquest, Anglo-Saxon migration and the culture and people's lives of the period, ranging from the Roman invasion in the first century to 731 A. D. The book shows some literary values for it not only contains stories and miracles but also it is narrated in a vivid style which indicates his literary consciousness. For this work, Bede got the title of "Father of English History".

2. Alfred the Great (849—901)

Alfred the Great is not merely an accomplished king but an influential literary figure in the development of Old English prose. His contributions may be found in various fields: society, economy, literature, and education.

He was born in 849. When he was a child, he was taken to visit the culture center of Europe such as Rome and France. This experience impelled him to introduce the European culture into England. In 871, Alfred became the King of Wessex and led his people to fight against the Danish invaders. Finally, a peace agreement of the Treaty of Wedmore (878) was signed so that the southern part of England got a period of peace and political stability.

Under his leadership, the kingdom became strong and prosperous and the culture thrived. Besides the political achievements, Alfred contributed a lot to English literature. First, he organized scholars to translate numerous works from Latin into English. Among these was Bede's *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. These translation works increased cultural exchange between English people and other nations.

Secondly, Alfred created an Anglo-Saxon prose style. He changed the old Latin style, making it easier to understand and to express fluently, which helped to form a natural style in English, which is simple, straightforward, clear, and effective.

Thirdly, he compiled the important literary and historical work, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a year-by-year description of important events in Britain. The book covers important events of politics, economy, culture, religion and wars. This work was written in simple and straightforward language. For all his achievements, King Alfred was given the title "Father of English Prose".

Chapter Two

English Literature from 1066 to 1485

I. Historical Contexts

The year 1066 was crucial in English history and culture for England underwent the most significant and profound change.

Three historical events converged in one single year: the death of the Anglo-Saxon King Edward and the coronation of his successor King Harold, the conquest of William of Normandy, and his own coronation as King William. To an island that had been repeatedly invaded and colonized, the conquest of 1066 stands for the climax, bringing about a far-reaching influence on England at the all social, religious and cultural levels.

The coming of Normans marked the final establishment of feudalism. Since then, the social conflicts had become sharpened. The serfs lived at the bottom of the feudal hierarchy, who were tied to the land where they worked, and nobles and lords with the king at top as the ruling class, belonged to the upper rank of the society, who enjoyed a lot of privileges and the fruits of serfs' labor. The Normans restored the Church in England, constructed new cathedrals, founded new monasteries, built cities and towns.

From the eleventh century to the thirteenth century, Popes launched a series of Crusade with an aim of recovering the Holy Land from Islam. Many Norman lords and nobles, even including kings got involved in these long-time and intermittent military expeditions. It may well be the crusades, with their strange mixture of adventurism and religious idealism that promoted the rise of what came to be known as Chivalry—the system, principles, and customs of knighthood and qualities idealized by knighthood. The knights were also known as gentlemen-warriors, usually high-born, raised by a sovereign to privileged military status after training as a squire. They normally went into battle on

horse-back and were supposed to possess the qualities such as bravery, courtesy, honor, and gallantry.

Along with the establishment of a new system of government, a new culture characterized with the co-existence of three languages emerged. English, spoken by the common people. Norman French became the language of the courts, of law, of literature, and of most of the nobility. Latin was used among scholars and in church. Only 250 years later did English restored its predominance, but by that time it had already drawn a lot on the other sources, French and Latin.

While Norman kings strove to build a centralized secular government, they frequently confronted with an urge and pressure from the church. Thus this created a conflict which lasted throughout the whole Medieval Period. The kings and aristocrats wanted to extend their lands and judicial powers on one hand, and on the other hand the church tried to maintain its independence of secular power. The conflict became intensified and finally exploded during the reign of Henry II who sent his knights to murder Thomas à Becket, the Chancellor and Archbishop of Canterbury Cathedral, simply because the latter refused to collaborate with the king in the judicial affairs and clerical selections. Finally, the king had to succumb to the Pope and Becket was canonized. Later St. Thomas à Becket became a popular source of both medieval and modern literature. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and T. S. Eliot's *The Murder of Cathedral* are good examples.

Henry II was succeeded by his son Richard the Lionheart who spent most of his time in fighting the Crusade in the late twelfth century. Then he was succeeded by his brother John, an incompetent king who lost most of English territory in France. The nobility rose against him and forced him to sign the Magna Carta (1215), a cornerstone of English freedom. In later literature, the adventures of Robin Hood and his band of outlaws in Sherwood Forest are set in the time of Richard and John.

It was during Henry III's reign, in the thirteenth century that the English Parliament appeared due to the efforts of Simon de Montfort. The Parliament was dominated by commoners from the towns of England.

The restoration of English as a dominant language at the royal court was achieved by Edward I, whose decision greatly promoted English as a national language.

In the fourteenth century the Parliament was divided into the House of Lords and the House of Commons. Since the birth of the Parliament, there was an incessant conflict between the king and the Parliament. The conflict finally resulted in the Civil War (1640) and the Glorious Revolution (1688).

The fourteenth century witnessed three significant events. Firstly, the Hundred Years' War broke out between England and France, which ended with the defeat of the English. Secondly, there was a rise of merchant class of free citizens in cities, who would exert a greater influence in political and social life in the coming year. Thirdly, the Black Death spread across England, which cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. So many deaths caused two consequences: the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 led by Watt Tyler, and John Ball, and a new urge to search for Christ's salvation.

A popular Christian movement began to shake the base of feudalism, and especially of feudal Christianity, under the leadership of an Oxford teacher, John Wyclif (1330—1884). He became the intellectual leader of people, called Lollards, who wished to return to a more personal form of Christianity. He worked with others in translating the Bible into English, the first attempt in the history of England.

In 1455, the War of Roses broke out between two big feudal families: the Lancasters and the Yorks. The war started great social turmoil and threw the nation into an abyss of suffering. Finally it was Henry Tudor who rose up from the struggle of the two families and seized the throne in 1445. The War of Roses ended with Henry Tudor becoming the new king of England, Henry VII.

In the late Medieval Age, there was a significant cultural event. That is the introduction of the printing press by William Caxton. The setting up of the printing press greatly promoted the spread and development of English culture and literature as well.

II. Literary Overview

The English literature in the late Medieval Age began in the twelfth century soon after the Norman Conquest. Among the conquering classes in the courts, there was a need for poetry and narrative literature. However, it seemed that

the French-speaking Normans, though superior in culture, had no literary sources of their own, so they had to draw on the Celtic myths and stories.

In 1136 a Welsh cleric, Geoffrey of Monmouth, wrote his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*), a Latin prose work about legendary kings of Britain including King Arthur. His material was partly from the chronicles of British history, but much came from his imagination, or from the oral stories about Arthur. The historical importance of Geoffrey's work is enormous for it introduces into writing some of the major stories of the Medieval Age and the legendary hero—Arthur. In his works Arthur becomes a great leader of the British, setting out to attack Rome in company with his knights.

In 1155 a Norman man called Wace finished a version of Geoffrey's story, *Le Roman de Brut*. He added the story of the Round Table and more romantic details to the Arthurian legend. In his writing, Arthur emerges as the model of chivalry and of courtesy, and embodiment of the ideal qualities required of the noble warrior.

In the twelfth century a new type of narrative literature called romance sprang up. Romance was a long composition in verse or in prose, depicting the life and adventures of a knight, a man of noble birth skilled in the use of weapons. He was commonly described as riding forth to seek adventures, taking part in tournaments, or fighting for his lord in battle. He was devoted to the church, the king and sometimes an idealized lady. The code of manners and morals of a knight is known as chivalry.

The enormous romances produced in this period could be divided into three kinds; the subjects of France dealing with the stories of Charlemagne, the subjects of Rome dealing with stories from ancient Greece and Rome, for example, the exploits of Alexander the Great, and the subjects of Britain dealing with the stories of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table.

Then in the second half of the thirteenth century, England witnessed its first literary flowering. Almost all the important works of Middle English literature were written in this period, such as *Piers Plowman*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl* and *The Canterbury Tales*. Except the last one, all the others were long narratives written in alliterative verse, similar to that used in Old English poems like *Beowulf*. These alliterative poems show a new confidence in the strength of English as a literary language, and may be the