

英国文学史提纲

范存忠

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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 lord;
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 the "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-hleoethum

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

5. 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 the "Ecclesiastical History of the English People", written in Latin and later translated into English.

The "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.

6. King Alfred and "Old English Chronicle" Alfred (849—901) 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 the "Old English Chronicle", — a memorandum year by year of English events up to 1154.

The early part of the 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 the "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

7. 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.

8. 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 vo-

cabulary, 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 changed.

In general, the literary medium of the 13th and 14th centuries is almost a new language with new tunes.

The finest of English romances is "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", written down about 1370 in the northwest of England — Cheshire or Lancashire.

9. "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" King Arthur and his knights and ladies are feasting at the New Year, when there rides into the hall a huge green knight, gorgeously clad with a green axe, on a green horse. "Who will chop off my head with this green axe, and let me chop off his, at the Green Chapel, a year hence?" Young Gawain accepts the challenge, and swings a great blow. Across the floor leaps the head. The Green Knight picks

up his head, gets on his saddle and rides away.

In November Gawain starts his journey — long, lonely and cheerless — among the wild mountains of North Wales. On Christmas Eve he comes upon a fair castle, where he finds a hearty welcome and luxurious comfort. The Lord of the Castle offers to direct him to the Green Knight, but prevails on him to stay in the castle until the New Year. In jest, they agree that for the following days each will give the other whatever he may obtain.

Each day the Lord is out hunting, and Gawain rests in his room. Each day the Lady of the Castle visits Gawain, encourages him to make love to her — and kisses him. Each night Gawain gives the host hearty kisses in exchange for the deer, the boar, the fox that the host brought back. But the third day he is weak enough to accept the Lady's silken girdle which is supposed to have the power to protect from wounds.

On New Year's day, Gawain is taken to a desolate snow-filled hollow among the cliffs. Out rushes the Green Knight, axe in hand; the blow falls and wounds Gawain slightly. Gawain springs to defence. But the Green Knight coolly explains that he was no other than the Lord of the Castle, who had set his wife to tempt Gawain, and that Gawain's error in accepting the Lady's protecting girdle had cost him the little wound. Gawain, with mingled shame and high relief, makes his long, lonely way back to Arthur's court.

The story is shaped with a sense of narrative unity not often found in Arthurian romances. It contains all the traditional elements of metrical romance — marvellous adventure, courtly life, fantastic love-making. It depicts the knightly society, not as what it was, but as what it might be. Like other romances, it shows almost complete detachment from the life of man.

But the poem contains admirable descriptions of the scenery through which Sir Gawain wanders, — the landscape not bred of fancy, but characteristic of Arthur's own Britain. The hunting of the deer, the boar and the fox is, too, depicted from reality.

IV FOLK TALES AND FOLK SONGS

10. Folk Tales While the metrical romances were primarily composed for the knights and ladies of the court and the castle, the folk tales were based upon folk lore and meant for popular consumption. They are much shorter than the romances. They run from beast fables to rather unsavoury incidents of bourgeois life — dull husbands tricked by clever wives, or greedy men gulled by jesting rogues.

Of the beast fables, "The Owl and the Nightingale" written not far from 1200, may be taken as an illustrative example. It is a long debate between the two birds. The owl, says the nightingale, is a bird of darkness, blind with

raucous song, like a hen lost in the snow; but she, the nightingale, sings sweetly, usefully, and is beloved of men. The owl retorts that the nightingale is wanton, useless, chattering like a priest, local and provincial, while she, the owl, sings cheerfully, prophesying, advising, and edifying mankind. Even after death she is useful as a scarecrow! All night they debate. The nightingale claims the victory just as dawn breaks, and all about little songbirds burst into chorus in the nightingale's favour. But the wise wren calls for the verdict, and they all fly off to find a good judge.

But how they sped, and what the doom,
 When they to Portisham had come,
 I know not, so I cannot tell;
 Here ends the tale, and so — farewell.

The general question is a familiar one — youth versus age, pleasure versus sobriety, the world versus the cloister. Humour is mixed with satire. The poem is an epitome of many motives in early medieval literature.

11. Folk Songs English songs had existed long before the Norman Conquest, but recorded songs are scanty. The reason is that folk songs are not learned by rote; they flit from ear to ear, anonymously, for a good song belongs not to the composer but to the people.

The song tradition continued after the Norman Conquest. We hear of a 12th-century priest who was kept awake all night while the villagers were singing and dancing in the churchyard. Next morning at service he would have begun, "Dominus vobiscum" (i. e. "The Lord be with you"), as usual, but to the scandal of the whole diocese he repeated what he had heard the previous night: "Sweet Heart, have pity!"

Among the scanty relics of the 13th century is the "Cuckoo Song", which kept in its cadence a measure of homely vigour and simplicity:

Summer is y — comen in!
 Loud sing cuckoo!
 Groweth seed and bloweth mead,
 And springeth the wood now,
 Sing cuckoo! ...

And there were carols and rounds that sprang from folk dances; there were work-songs, especially of women spinning and sewing; there were "aubes", the parting dialogue-songs of lovers interrupted by the watchman's cry at dawn; there were songs of the ill-married, still questing wife; songs of spring; "chanson d'aventure", of the general formula:

I went walking the other day,