

# A Short History *of* English Literature



Waldo Clarke



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**To Kate**

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# Contents

	Acknowledgments	viii
1	From Saxon Times to the Renaissance	i
2	The Renaissance and the Elizabethan Age	11
3	The Seventeenth Century—Poetry and Drama	23
4	Seventeenth-Century Prose	34
5	The Eighteenth Century—Poetry, Prose and Drama	40
6	The Romantic Revival in English Poetry	51
7	The Nineteenth Century	60
8	The Novel, 1485-1830	73
9	The Nineteenth-Century Novel	81
10	The Twentieth-Century Novel	87
11	Poetry in the Twentieth Century	95
12	Drama in the Twentieth Century	100
	Notes	105
	Index	114



# Chapter I

# From Saxon Times to the Renaissance

## The Old English Period

The earliest form of literature was a simple account of some heroic deed recited or sung by that specially gifted individual who became known as a bard or minstrel. These early poems describe in simple rhythm the exploits of a hero, usually the king or leader of the tribe, who has performed some deed of valour centering on the slaughter either of a notable beast or of a notorious enemy. These poems generally involve the description of a journey and sometimes a war or a series of battles. Such very briefly is the basic framework of the earliest literary forms—of the Homeric poems in Greece, the Chansons de Geste in France and in England of the first major poem, 'Beowulf'. It is with this work that this survey of the growth and development of English literature must begin even though it is written in the Old English of pre-conquest times. For 'Beowulf' is the first English poem which has survived and which is clearly a work of literature.

The manuscript in which 'Beowulf' is preserved in the British Museum dates from the tenth century but the poem was probably written some 300 years earlier. It is undoubtedly a work of the pre-Christian period and the few Christian elements were almost certainly inserted by Christian minstrels when revising the poem. After praising the heroic achievements of the Danes the poem describes how the great hall of Heorot was built by Hrothgar and how his happiness there was short-lived. A monster, Grendel, comes to the hall at night and devours 30 of Hrothgar's knights. After 12 years Beowulf, nephew of King Hygelac, comes to the aid of Hrothgar and with his men sleeps in the hall. Grendel appears but Beowulf seizes him by the arm which he tears off, and the monster, mortally wounded, flees to his lair. There is feasting and rejoicing but during the night the mother of Grendel comes to the hall and avenges her son by carrying off Aeschere, Hrothgar's counsellor. Beowulf follows the monster to her den, a great pool,



and above it 'the joyless wood'. Into this he plunges and there in a cave he finally slays her. Beowulf returns to the land of the Geats where he becomes king and reigns happily for 50 years until once more the peace is broken by a dragon. Beowulf returns once again, slays the dragon but is mortally wounded during the struggle and dies. He is burnt together with his armour and treasure on a funeral pyre and a great grave-mound is built over him. The poem is remarkable not only for the picturesque quality of its imagery and the simple force of its narrative, but also for its evocation of the life of the people and of the northern atmosphere of mist-shrouded moors and mysterious pools and caves. There is also another memorable narrative poem, dating from the tenth century, 'The Battle of Maldon'. This commemorates the heroic fight of a small band of Anglo-Saxon warriors surrounded and outnumbered by a much larger band of invading Norsemen.

Among other pre-Christian poems we should recall here 'The Wanderer', 'Seafarer', 'Widsith' and 'Deor', in each of which there is a predominance of lyric or rather elegiac elements. Christian poetry is represented by the brief quotation from Caedmon by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and by four poems written a century later by Cynewulf. Of those the best is 'Elene', a poem describing the discovery of the true Cross by the Empress Helena. It is an eminently serious poem but still remarkable for its richness of imagery.

The prose work of the Old English period has little of the attractive quality of its verse but it is not uninteresting in the study of the development of a long tradition of different literary forms to note that in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* we have the earliest English work of history, a compilation which is both valuable to the historian and interesting to the ordinary reader. In the work of Bede we have the first translation of the Gospels into Old English. The translations of Bede, Orosius and Boethius by King Alfred and the sermons and other theological writings of Abbot Aelfric are all works of interest and importance.

The battle of Hastings (1066), and the conquest of Britain by the Normans, like most other battles, had no real influence on the native literature of England other than possibly to delay its development completely for some 200 years. During the period 1100 to 1300 almost all work of any consequence was written in Latin and even when, after 1300, English poetry and prose once more began to assert their position, it was under the influence of French and Latin culture. This in itself was probably of value as the tendency towards seriousness of thought and sombreness of description to be found in almost all Old English poetry was influenced by something of the sweetness and light more characteristic of French literature.

Two dates are worth remembering as early milestones in the evolution of English as a literary language. The first is 1362 when a statute was promulgated ordering that all cases in the law-courts were to be conducted in English. The second is 1385 when the translator and chronicler, John of Trevisa, records that English had then become the official language of instruction in the grammar schools. As he puts it: 'In alle the grammar schools of England children leveth Frensche and construeth and lerneth an Englishe.'



# Mediaeval Poetry

## Geoffrey Chaucer (1340–1400)

It was in this way that the road was prepared for the sudden and almost sensational emergence of one of England's greatest poets—Geoffrey Chaucer. Before considering his life and work we should mention the few poems in English which appeared in the first half of the fourteenth century. Of these only two are of real importance: the first is 'Pearl', a poetic lament for a dead child. Its beauty lies in its simplicity and passionate sincerity. The second is the metrical romance 'Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight'. It is a long poem of some 2,500 lines of alliterative verse which tells the story of a strange adventure which happened to Sir Gawayne. The real value of the poem lies not only in the skill of its composition and technique but in the vivid descriptions it contains of many aspects of mediaeval civilization against a background of natural beauty.

The style of 'Sir Gawayne' has a certain appeal, but when it is compared with the infinitely more subtle work which appeared not more than 40 years later one's amazement is only equalled by gratitude that such a change could come about. If any man of letters were asked to make up his list of the 12 English books which he could not do without, he would almost certainly include *The Canterbury Tales* of Chaucer. He would probably also feel inclined to include Chaucer's other long poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*, as well.

Chaucer's life, which coincided roughly with the first half of the Hundred Years War, is of unusual interest in its wide range of experience and activity. The son of a vintner, Geoffrey Chaucer was born in London in or about 1340. As a boy he entered the service of Lionel, Duke of Clarence and his wife, the Countess of Ulster, most probably as a page. In 1359 he is known to have gone to France in the army of Edward III; he was taken prisoner and in the following year was ransomed, partly at the King's expense. A few years later Chaucer entered the Royal Household, as a Yeoman of the Bedchamber. From 1367 onwards for some ten years Chaucer, with the powerful backing of John of Gaunt, was employed on diplomatic and commercial missions of considerable importance; while in this branch of the King's service he visited Genoa, Florence and Padua where he probably met the Italian poet, Petrarch, and the famous storyteller, Boccaccio. In 1374 the King granted 'to our beloved esquire Geoffrey Chaucer' a pitcher of wine daily. In the same year there is definite reference to the existence of Chaucer's wife, Philippa. Eight years later Chaucer became Comptroller of Petty Customs in the Port of London, and four years after this, in 1386, he became a Knight of the Shire<sup>1</sup> for Kent. This year was, in a sense, a turning point. Chaucer lost his Comptrollership; his wife died in 1387 and to obtain money he sold his two pensions. In 1389 he was made Clerk of the King's Works. Such was the course of his life until 1400 when he died in a house near Westminster Abbey. Here the first great English poet is buried, in the Poets' Corner.

There is in Chaucer a universality of appeal, a breadth and tolerance, a sympathy with and understanding of a wide range of men and women; above all a blend of humour and profound insight into the comedy and tragedy of human life. *The Canterbury Tales*<sup>2</sup> with their lively Prologue and



the great tragic poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*,<sup>3</sup> are a complete picture of a world and there is little more that we can ask of a poet than that he should create a world with as much sincerity, realism and sympathy as Chaucer achieved in his poetry.

Chaucer's work falls roughly into three periods: a first period in which he was strongly influenced by French literature and particularly by the famous 'Roman de la Rose' of which he translated nearly 2,000 lines; a second period roughly from 1379 to 1385 in which the Italian influence of Petrarch and Boccaccio was dominant; this was the period of 'The Parliament of Fowls', 'The House of Fame', 'The Legend of Good Women': of the translation of Boethius, and above all of *Troilus and Criseyde*; finally, a third period when in the fullness of maturity he wrote his greatest work, *The Canterbury Tales*.

One of Chaucer's outstanding characteristics as a poet is the freshness of language which appeals as strongly now as it must have done in the fourteenth century. His descriptions of men and women, of seasons, of clothes and gestures are as gaily-coloured and as convincing as when they were first written and they constitute one of the most lively pictures of a whole society ever created by the pen of man. Mediaeval England with all its virtues and vices, robust and vivid, is here. It is true we do not see the kings and queens or the great barons any more than we see the serfs and villeins, but the others are all here in the Prologue, in the Tales and in the links between—small passages of infinite interest which the casual reader often misses. There is every type of ecclesiastic—male and female, from the Monk who loved hunting better than prayer to the wretched Summoner with his pimply face and disgusting habits. There is the Knight and his young son, the Squire, who was such an amorous young man that at night-time:

He slept no more than doth a nightingale.

These two represent the minor feudal aristocracy of the day. Drawn, however, with even greater skill out of his intimate knowledge of the professional and commercial worlds are such characters as the Reeve, with his long thin legs, the Merchant, the Shipman, the Lawyer, of whom Chaucer says:

Nowher so bisy a man as he ther was  
And yet he seemed bisier than he was

or the Doctor, who knowing that gold was an essential ingredient in his medicines had a very special liking for that precious metal. There are also other representatives of the British middle class of Chaucer's time—the lewd and lively Wife of Bath who had been married five times, quite apart from other affairs in her youth; the Cook of London who later on has an uproarious drinking bout with the Miller—another character who is memorable in this most brilliant of literary portrait galleries.

Chaucer is sometimes said to be a satirist. It is, however, probably more accurate to refer to him as a humorist—the first great English humorist.



One essential factor in satire is moral indignation and Chaucer certainly did not seem to be endowed with this. One essential factor in humour is sympathy and of this Chaucer had more than most men. He sees the faults, the idiosyncracies and the vices of his characters and he depicts these with the same care as he depicts the virtues of these people. He looks at them and laughs and the pilgrims he met probably laughed too! Above all Chaucer admired the efficiency which he seemed to find in them and because of this and because they were human beings who sang fantastic duets, like the Pardoner and the Summoner, or had warts on their noses or unusually thin legs, he happily overlooked their shortcomings. For all this humour and sympathy we turn to the Prologue and to the less serious tales. For the deeper aspects of Chaucer's art we must go to such poems as 'The Knight's Tale' of Palamon and Arcite, to the dramatic realism of 'The Pardoner's Tale', or to the often tragic poem of *Troilus and Criseyde*. In spite of his sense of life's little ironies and his gay humour Chaucer's awareness of the tragedy of the human condition is often heard as in Palamon's words in 'The Knight's Tale':

What is this world? What asketh man to have  
Now with his love, now in the colde grave  
Allone, withouten any companye?

Such is the feeling that dominates this story of love and death, with its slow steady rhythm of construction, its brilliant characterization, and its expert handling of verse form. It is not, however, a prevailing mood with Chaucer who clearly chose to depict the world which he had observed with such unfailing accuracy through the medium of comedy. The following passage from the Prologue incorporates something of the freshness of phrase, the gentle ironical humour and, above all, exact observation which are some of Chaucer's chief qualities. The passage quoted is part of the description of the Squire.

Embrouded was he, as it were a meede  
Al ful of fresshe floures whyte and reede;  
Singynge he was or floytynge al the day;  
He was as fressh as is the month of May.  
Short was his gowne, with sleeves longe and wyde;  
Wel coude he sitte on hors, and faire ryde;  
He coude songes make and wel endite,  
Juste and eek daunce and wel purtreie and write.  
So hote he lovede that by nightertale  
He slept no more than dooth a nightyngale.  
Curteys he was, lowly and servysable,  
And carf biforn his fader at the table.

### **William Langland (1330-1400)**

The extraordinary thing about Chaucer, and this comes home with great force when one turns to his contemporaries and successors, is the modernity of his outlook and style. A first reading of Langland or even of Gower tends



to be discouraging. Of the two, William Langland is in some ways, possibly because of his strong social and moral sense, the greater poet even if at times we feel that he paints a somewhat distorted picture of the corruption of the Church in the fourteenth century. Equally uncompromising are his depictions of certain aspects of mediaeval life. He shows a love of realism in his description of the ale-house in which Glotoun meets his friends, Watte the Warner, Timme the Tinker and others. Here is Langland's account in his strong alliterative verse:

There was laughyng and lairyng and 'let go the cuppe'  
And seten so till evensonge and songen umwhile  
Tyl Glotoun had y-globbed a galoun and a gille.

He stumbles about on his way out of the inn so that:

With all the woe of this world his wife and his wench  
Brought him home to his bed and brought him therein.

### **John Gower (1330–1408)**

A friend of Chaucer, Gower achieved nothing equal either to Chaucer's Prologue or Langland's 'Piers Plowman'. The *Confessio Amantis* consists of a large number of loosely connected stories, told often with much narrative skill as in 'Ceix and Alceone' or 'Adrian and Bardus'. His style has none of the richness or humour that we find in Chaucer, but in its simplicity it is often very effective. This is particularly noticeable in the story of 'Jason and Medea' in which the exact atmosphere for the enchantments of Medea is created in a few lines:

And that was at the midnight tide  
The world was still on every side.  
With open head and foot al bare  
Her hair to-spread she gan to fare.

and then the finely suggestive line:

She glode forth as an adder doth.

The tomb of Gower, who lived most of his life in London, is still to be seen in Southwark Cathedral.

### **The Scottish Chaucerians**

There is a group of poets who came under the influence of Chaucer. These poets, who include King James I, Robert Henryson and William Dunbar, are usually referred to as the Scottish Chaucerians because of their debt to the satirical and narrative skill of their acknowledged master.

James was captured by the English in 1406 while on his way to France. He spent some 19 years in England and while here composed his long poem 'The King's Quhair' or King's Book. It tells of his love for Lady Jane Beaufort and uses a seven-line stanza form now known as the Rime Royal.<sup>4</sup>



Henryson was a schoolmaster at Dunfermline Abbey. His long poem 'The Testament of Cresseid' was so close in form and theme to the work of Chaucer that it was attributed to him until 1721.

William Dunbar's life and work coincides with the early years of the sixteenth century. In such memorable poems as 'The Two Married Women and the Widow', 'The Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins' and 'The Lament for the Makars' there is a sense of humour even more lively and realistic than Chaucer's, a fine skill in satire and a powerful poetic imagination.

## Mediaeval Drama

Largely contemporary with Chaucer, Langland and Gower we have to consider a literary and social movement of great importance — the rise of the drama. It first saw the light in the liturgy of the Church. Priests customarily gave dramatic versions of appropriate incidents in the life of Christ at Easter and Christmas; thus at the Easter Mass the priest and choir in a brief dialogue chanted a representation of the coming of the three Marys to the tomb of Christ. Three angels meet them and chant:

*Quem quaeritis in sepulchro, Christicolae?*  
Whom do you seek in the tomb, O Christians?

to which the women replied:

*Jesum Nazarenum crucifixum, coelicolae.*  
Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, O heavenly ones.

There was a gradual increase in length and variety of action until at last with an ever-increasing popularity the liturgical drama or mystery plays had to be performed in churchyards, squares or on village greens. At some date well before Chaucer's time and probably in the early thirteenth century the clergy ceased to participate in the plays, which passed into the possession of the town guilds. The confirmation of the Feast of Corpus Christi on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday at the Council of Vienne in 1311 gave the guilds a fixed date once a year when the long cycles of mystery plays could conveniently be presented. Of the numerous cycles of mystery plays only four have come down to us. It was at about this time also that English was substituted for the Latin used by the priests. The changes in situation and presentation naturally affected the matter and style of the plays. The mingling of tragedy and comedy occurred frequently in the everyday life of mediaeval times. The solemn architecture of the cathedrals and churches was relieved by the grotesque gargoyles and strangely carved choir-stalls. Out of this human weakness—the desire we sometimes have to laugh in church—grew the first example of English comic drama. With solemn main themes the mystery plays frequently combined scenes of farce and buffoonery. Such a form of relief occurs notably in the story of Noah and the Flood. Noah is the first henpecked husband and the fun begins in the version of the Chester Cycle, when his wife refuses to come into the Ark because she does not wish to leave her gossiping friends. When at last she is



prevailed upon, she gives Noah a box on the ear. As she embarks, Noah says politely:

Welcome, wife, into this boat

to which she replies with a box on the ear and the words:

And have thou that for thy note.

A less rudimentary comic effect is obtained in the Towneley Second Shepherds' Play with the insertion of a sheep-stealing episode. This is the first full treatment of the comedy of human frailty and is the forerunner of many another play depicting the follies of men and women. Among plays unrelieved by comedy one of the most remarkable is the Chester play of *Abraham and Isaac*, which in its tragic simplicity and force is the first real example of tragic drama. One final theme was added to the gradually evolving tradition of native drama—this was the morality play in which the characters are personified abstractions. Their value lies in their concentration upon character rather than action. This was a very necessary step at a time when interest tended to concentrate on event and action. The movement away from the colourful action of Biblical history to the representation of the struggle within the soul of the central character of *Everyman*—the greatest of the morality plays—is the most significant dramatic development of the later Middle Ages.

## The Arthurian Legends

There remain two other literary achievements of the period—the collection of Arthurian legends brought together and put into English by Sir Thomas Malory in the *Morte d'Arthur*; and the anonymous ballads, many of which were written at this time. The appeal of the former is wide indeed. Here is the age of chivalry in all its formal beauty and in all its high ideals. They are embodied most fully in the splendid figure of Sir Lancelot whose character is summed up in the magnificent words of Sir Ector, his brother:

'Ah Lancelot,' he said, 'thou were head of all Christian knights, and now I dare say' said Sir Ector, 'thou, Sir Lancelot, there thou liest, that thou were never matched of earthly knights' hand. And thou were the courteoust knight that ever bare shield. And thou were the truest friend to thy lover that ever bestrad horse, and thou were the truest lover of a sinful man that ever loved woman. And thou were the kindest man that ever struck with sword. And thou were the goodliest person that ever came among press of knights. And thou were the meekest man and the gentlest that ever ate in hall among ladies. And thou were the sternest knight to thy mortal foe that ever put spear in the rest.'

Then there was weeping and dolour out of measure.



Almost equally interesting are the characterizations of other knights, of Sir Dinadan, the humorist, or Sir Gawayne who comes to battle in Malory's words 'as brym as any boar'. In his quarrel with Sir Lancelot he says: 'Make you no more language, but deliver the Queen from thee and pyke thee lightly out of this court.'

The *Morte d'Arthur* is no mere compilation. Out of the wide variety of his sources—Geoffrey of Monmouth,<sup>5</sup> Wace,<sup>6</sup> Layamon<sup>7</sup> and Chrétien de Troyes,<sup>8</sup> Malory built a well-constructed, selective narrative. King Arthur, Queen Guinevere and Sir Lancelot are the central figures and around them are grouped the adventures of the knights and the story of the quest of the Holy Grail. It is all related with that objective vividness which also characterizes the ballads. Thus, describing the arrival of Sir Lancelot at the Castle of Carbonek Malory gives the whole situation in a few well-chosen words:

And there was a postern opened towards the sea and was open without any keeping save two lions kept the entry and the moon shone clear.

Caxton, the first English printer, saw the significance of Malory's work when he said in his Preface:

And for to pass the time this book shall be pleasant to read in but for to give faith and belief that all is true that is contained herein ye be at your liberty.

It was with these words that the first English work of prose fiction was given to the world.

Of William Caxton, one cannot speak too highly. He had the great gift of being able to single out what was worth preserving. He printed copies of *The Canterbury Tales*, the *Morte d'Arthur*, *The Golden Legend*<sup>9</sup> and Higden's *Polychronicon*<sup>10</sup> at his printing press at Westminster.

## Ballads

The ballad may be briefly defined as a simple but dramatically told narrative poem of moderate length. It is hardly necessary to say that here we are concerned only with what is called the 'traditional' ballad. This was anonymous and impersonal in outlook and was composed to be sung or recited. The frequency of choric refrains is one of the strongest proofs of its essentially popular character and communal origin. It is, however, quite certain when we consider the high level of artistic excellence in the best ballads that they were the work not of groups but of gifted individuals. The ballads deal with simple, straightforward emotions and situations and do so through the use of conventional symbols. Among the best-known of these symbols are the 'wee pen-knife' with which the woman is normally armed and the 'bright brown sword' of the man. Most objects are made of gold or silver and there are usually 24 knights. Two of the commonest themes are those of the love-sick knight and the return from the dead. In the best ballads



the reader is faced with ancient passions and situations, with themes which are usually tragic and in which there is no comic relief. In their combination of dramatic tragedy and lyricism they achieve a narrative power and a realism found in few other forms of literature.

## The Beginnings of Prose

Apart from Malory's great and romantic work of fiction, the *Morte d'Arthur*, we must 'some reckoning make', as Chaucer would have put it, of the remaining prose achievement of the fifteenth century. It was an age of didactic writing. The famous collection known as the *Gesta Romanorum*, originally written in Latin, was translated into English in this period. At about the same date the *Legenda Aurea* or *Golden Legend* with its simply told lives of the saints was translated also. The first example of theological controversy was the work of Dr Pocock, Bishop of Chichester, and soon after Pocock's death in 1461 Sir John Fortescue set out his exposition of political theory in his book *On the Governance of England*. It was the first important period of small books on every conceivable subject—hunting, hawking, cooking, surgery, medicine, the keeping of horses, natural science and astrology. In a field that was more reminiscent of fiction there was *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. It is a guide-book for travellers to Jerusalem, a most extraordinary mingling of fact and fiction conveyed with a simple and often delightful straightforwardness as when the author writes: 'Of Paradise can I not speak properly, for I have not been there.'



# Chapter 2      The Renaissance and the Elizabethan Age

The Elizabethan Age is one of the richest and most exciting periods in English history—the age of the Renaissance which shines even more brightly after the empty darkness of the fifteenth century. This Renaissance does not coincide neatly with the Elizabethan Age. It carries over well into the seventeenth century and is as remarkable in its impact on such a personality as that of John Milton as it was on Sir Thomas More 150 years earlier.

It was a remarkable force that filled the men of this age with so much fire and creative energy. The Renaissance started, it is true, as a revival of learning, a full academic study and appreciation of the glories of ancient Greek and Latin language and literature. The period, in this country, opens with the names of the scholars Grocyn,<sup>1</sup> Linacre,<sup>2</sup> Colet,<sup>3</sup> and Thomas More.<sup>4</sup> It develops into a growing awareness of the richness and power of the English language and a far-reaching aspiration among such critics and poets as Sidney, Spenser and Marlowe to achieve great work. This consciousness, fortunately, coincided with a wide awakening of national consciousness, the awareness of England and Englishmen. Drake, Hawkins and Frobisher made their epic physical gestures and a huge wind blew most propitiously on the day the Spanish Armada ventured into the Channel. The aspiring mind and the adventurous body were in harmony as never before and perhaps never afterwards. And the result was the outburst of creativity in literature, music and art of the Elizabethan Age.

It shows itself first in the outpouring of lyric song that starts early in this period and never dies away—that singing urge which arises whenever men are aware of the joy of existence, the adventure of life and the mystery of death.

## Poetry 1500–1600

The first lyrics of the Renaissance period date from the Tudor Age. They were largely the work of two poets, the Earl of Surrey and Sir Thomas