

# A Brief Introduction to English Literature

## 英国文学

左金梅 张德玉 编著

中国海洋大学出版社

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# **Part One   Old English Literature**

## **I . Historical Background**

In the middle of the fifth century several Germanic tribes invaded the British Isles and established permanent settlements there. They brought with them there a language, a religion, and a poetic tradition. In time, their culture was transformed by natural processes from inside and by invasions and other influences from outside, the most important single force being the conversion of the island to Christianity.

The invaders consisted of three Germanic tribes — the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes. The origins of the three are clouded in obscurity and controversy, and it is said that distinctions between Angles and Saxons had been blurred even before their migration to England. The term Anglo-Saxon originally differentiated the English from the continental Saxons, but it came to include all the Germanic invaders, possibly because of the overwhelming prominence of the Saxons. Yet, surprisingly enough, *England* and *English* are derived from the word *Angle*. At any rate, by the end of the sixth century the Jutes occupied Kent (in the southeast); the Saxons held Sussex and Wessex (in the south); the Angles settled in East Anglia (north of Kent),

Mercia (in central England), and Northumbria (in the north, bordering on Scotland). Tribal affiliations soon gave way to somewhat loose political units, small kingdoms based upon new geographic ties.

The social unit of the Germanic tribes was the family or clan. Each member bore responsibility for any wrongs inflicted or suffered by his kinsmen; included among his duties was the obligation to execute revenge or to arrive at a peaceful settlement through the payment of a predetermined value in money or property. A youth would attach himself to a strong leader. In exchange for economic and legal protection, the young man offered military service. The chief fought for victory, and the followers fought for their chief. If the young man retreated from the field after his leader had been killed, he suffered reproach and infamy for the rest of his life. This kind of social structure can be seen in *Beowulf* and in other Old English poems.

## **II . The Development of the English Language**

English, like other languages, has continually changed and continues to change in response to fresh influences. New habits slowly develop among those who use the language, and drastic modifications take place as a result of contact with foreign cultures through trade, migration, and war. Sometimes a new field of learning catapults into public recognition — nuclear physics or rocket science, for instance — with the eventual result that portions of a highly specialized vocabulary filter down into popular usage.

The present-day English language is the product of several thousand years of such evolution. English is a member of a large

and ancient family of languages — the Indo-European Family of Languages, and it falls into three major periods: Old English or “Anglo-Saxon” (449-1066), Middle English (1066-1485), and Modern English (1485 to the present day). Old English differs from Modern English in spelling, pronunciation and grammar. Yet the most formidable difference between Old English and Modern English is in vocabulary. Old English was essentially unilingual: instead of borrowing from other languages it formed new words out of its own native resources. Modern English was enriched by foreign importations, especially French. Yet it proceeded to evolve largely from London English.

### III. Literary Features

Behind the literary products of the Anglo-Saxons, especially the poetry, lays a long oral tradition which developed during the time when the Germanic tribes still inhabited the European continent. Early Germanic poetry was composed and recited by the scop, a professional bard who may have often wandered from court to court hoping to acquire the patronage of some generous lords. At court feasts the scop would celebrate in song the deeds of real or legendary heroes out of the remote past.

But with the conversion of England to Christianity, the subject matter of poetry underwent a crucial change. Poetry and prose were committed to religious writing, and, with the Church virtually monopolizing the art of copying old works and creating new ones, the clerics generally preserved only such material as was considered serviceable to Christianity. The Old English poets either used Christian material from Scripture or the liturgy,

or they tried, with varying degrees of success, to get subjects of pagan derivation into the framework of the Christian universe. Beowulf could be comprehended as an ideal Christian King who had not been entirely divested of the thirst for worldly glory that motivated the Germanic warriors.

The verse patterns utilized by Old English poets also represented an accumulation of centuries of oral tradition. The poetic line, which was really two half-lines separated by a distinct pause, contained four accented syllables and a varying number of unaccented syllables. It was once thought that each of the four stressed syllables was accompanied by chords struck by the scop on a small harp.

Old English poets rarely used end rhyme, but they regularly used a system of alliteration. This alliteration involved the initial sounds, whether vowels or consonants, of the four stressed syllables. As a rule, three of the stressed syllables were alliterated, and it was the initial sound of the third accented syllable that normally determined the alliteration.

Rhythm and alliteration were not the only poetic devices. In order to achieve variety, as well as to suggest important attributes of his subject, the scop would frequently introduce a kind of metaphor called the *kenning*, a compound of two terms used in place of a common word. The sun, for example, could be referred to as "world-candle"; the prince as "ring giver"; the ocean as "sea-monster's home" or "gannet's bath". The *kenning* in the hands of a talented poet could provide a fresh appeal to the imagination of the audience.

Many of the earliest works written by English churchmen

were in Latin; and throughout the Old English period, as well as during the Middle Ages and thereafter, a number of English writers — John Milton, to cite a distinguished example — continued to produce sizable quantities of Latin verse and prose. Anglo-Latin literature in the Old English period was often didactic, its principal functions being to provide religious instruction or inspiration; but Anglo-Latin literature boasts a few writings which combine charm with piety and still others which can almost be called secular. Judged merely as literature, the Latin writings of the Anglo-Saxons may not rank high. But as a measure of the level of culture achieved and sustained in Anglo-Saxon England they are extremely valuable.

#### IV. Representative Writers and Works

A tremendous amount of Old English literature has perished, and much of that which has survived is in a fragmentary form. Among the most substantial surviving Old English poems such as *Widsith*, *Deor*, *Judith*, is *Beowulf*, which will be dealt with later.

The prose division of Anglo-Saxon literature is of less literary interest than the verse. But it is more abundant in quantity. The man most responsible for the development of literary prose during the Old English period was **Alfred the Great** (849-99), who, as part of his systematic efforts to make Wessex a center of English culture, translated or caused to be translated into English certain important Latin texts, among which is Bede's *History*. King Alfred's representative work is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the most important monument of Anglo-Saxon prose,

carrying us in contemporary vernacular history from the middle of the eighth century to the middle of the twelfth, preserving amid drier annals some exceedingly interesting fragments of composition of the more original kind, both in prose and verse, manifesting an ability to manage the subject that was only much later shown in other vernacular languages, and bridging for us the gulf between the ruin of Anglo-Saxon even before the Conquest and the rise of English proper more than a century subsequent to it.

The outstanding representative of Anglo-Latin culture was Bede (673-735). In his monastery at Jarrow, Northumbria, Bede encompassed many areas of intellectual accomplishment. He wrote Latin treatises on medicine, astronomy, mathematics and philosophy. He was also a biographer. His immortal achievement, however, was in the field of history. Bede's monumental *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (Ecclesiastical Histories of the English People) traces the history of England from Caesar's invasion, in 55 B. C., to 731, the year in which the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* was completed. The first writer to conceive of the English as one people with a single destiny, Bede would have his readers become more familiar with the actions and sayings of former men of renown. To make his narrative still more attractive, he introduced anecdotes, dramatic speeches, and miracles — all designed to show the Christian ideal as the most compelling force in the universe.

### V. *Beowulf* and the Heroic Epic Tradition

Sometime between the year 700 and the year 900 the first great English epic poem *Beowulf* was composed. It tells the



song of Beowulf, a warrior prince from Geatland in Sweden, who goes to Demark and kills the monster Grendel that has been attacking the great Hall of Heorot, built by Hrothgar, the Danish King. Grendel's mother, a water-monster, takes revenge by carrying off one of the king's noblemen, but Beowulf dives into the underwater lair in which she lives and kills her, too. Returning home, in due course, Beowulf becomes king of the Geats. The poem then moves forward about fifty years. Beowulf's kingdom is ravaged by a fire-breathing dragon that burns the royal hall. Beowulf, aided by a young warrior, Wiglaf, manages to kill the dragon, but is fatally wounded in the course of the fight. He pronounces Wiglaf his successor. The poem ends with Beowulf's burial and a premonition that the kingdom will be overthrown.

Structurally, *Beowulf* is built around three fights. Each of these involves a battle between those who live in the royal hall and a monster; the monsters, it is clear, are dangerous, unpredictable and incomprehensible forces that threaten the security and well-being of those in power and the way of life they represent. This is a pattern that is specific to the Anglo-Saxon period, but which also echoes down through the whole history of English literature. Time and time again, literary texts deal with an idea of order. There is a sense of a well-run state or a settled social order, and, for the individual a feeling of existing within a secure framework. In *Beowulf*, a sense of security is linked with the presence of the great hall as a place of refuge and shared values; it is a place for feasting and celebrations, providing warmth and protection against whatever might be encountered in the darkness outside. Over and over again, however, literary texts focus on