



SELECTED READINGS OF
BRITISH LITERATURE

英国文学选读

蒲若茜 肖淳端 董秋芳◎编著



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英国文学(选读)

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Preface and Acknowledgement

As an important branch of world literature, British literature has undergone over a millennium of history, yielding a great number of distinguished writers and internationally admired classics. With the aim of assisting Chinese college students to acquire an overview of such extraordinary diversity and vitality of this body of work within a semester's time, my collection is sorted by genre, including four most important genres in literature: poetry, drama, novel and essay.

In each chapter, key features of the genre together with its historical development are provided, representative writers for each genre and their masterpieces are discussed. In order to make this collection concise and convenient, selection was made from those British writers and works that are of historical or contemporary importance and influence. Moreover, academic comments on the selected authors are intended to give a conventional view of the importance and distinctive features of these authors and their analyzed works. My purpose is to give students a quick guide as well as a good start for further reading and research.

It has taken me about 10 years to prepare this collection, and tremendous efforts have been made on the revision of it, during which many parts have been amended or rewritten. I owe acknowledgement and appreciation to the following individuals, all of them are my postgraduate students or Ph. D candidates:

First of all, I own thanks to my former postgraduate students, Ms. Chang Hailan (常海兰), Ms. Chen Kangni (陈康妮), Ms. Gao Jingting (高婧婷), Ms. Li Huifang (李卉芳), Ms. Lin Xi (林茜), Ms. Ma Xiaoyuan (马晓园), Ms. Qin Jiayi (秦佳曦) and Ms. Shao Chunfa (邵春发). They contributed in collecting and typing the selected readings and submitted parts of the preliminary draft based on an outline I designed. Without their efforts the subsequent work would have been impossible.

Secondly, I would like to give my sincere appreciation to my Ph. D students, Ms. Xiao Chunduan (肖淳端), associate professor from Jinan University, and Ms. Dong Qiufang (董秋芳), assistant professor from Guangdong AIB Polytechnic College. They are the co-editors and both of them have devoted much time and effort to the numerous revisions of this collection. Without their contributions, this book would not be in its present form.

Last, but not the least, I should give credit to Dr. Thomas Moran, the foreign expert who has been working in Jinan University for such a long time that he regards Jinan as his real home.

Tom has proofread the whole book and helped in revising the final draft until the very last minute.

Though we have tried our best, defects and mistakes are unavoidable. For the blunders that may have escaped their scrutiny, I alone am responsible.

Pu Ruoqian (蒲若茜)
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Chapter One: Poetry

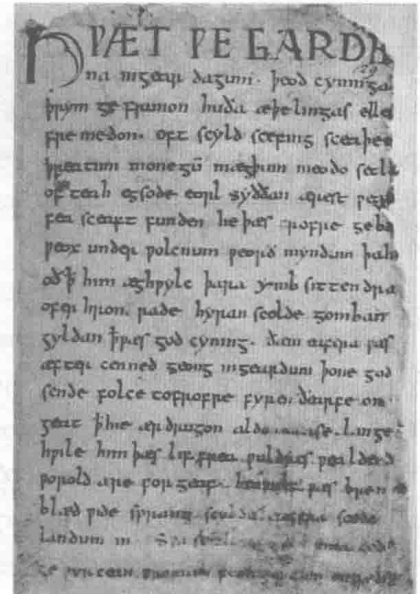
1.1 England's National Epic: *Beowulf*

An epic or a heroic poem generally refers to a long verse narrative on a serious subject. It is usually told in a formal style, on a heroic or quasi-divine figure whose actions have decisive impacts on the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race. A national epic is a long narrative poem which seeks or is believed to capture and express the essence or spirit of a particular nation.

As the greatest and the oldest known heroic poem written in Old English, *Beowulf* has been regarded as the national epic of England. It is the first major poem in a European vernacular language, telling about a hero's triumphs as a young warrior and his fated death as a defender of his people. The poem is remarkable for its sustained grandeur of tone and for the brilliance of its style.

Beowulf is a heroic poem consisting of 3,182 alliterative long lines and was composed sometime between the mid-seventh and 10th centuries. It is often referred to as the first important work of English literature and the greatest of all epics by the Germanic people. But who wrote *Beowulf* is a question that has mystified experts for centuries. It is generally believed that much of the poem had been in circulation in an oral narrative for many years before its manuscript version.

While the poem itself is English in language and origin, *Beowulf* deals not with native Englishmen, but with their Germanic forebears, especially with two south Scandinavian tribes, the Danes and the Geats, who lived on the Danish island of Zealand and in the Southern Sweden respectively. As the early Anglo-Saxons were the descendants of Germanic tribes that invaded Britain in the 5th century, there were a lot of shared cultural background between the Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians, and the Anglo-Saxons looked back to their relatives across the sea to tell stories about their own past. So *Beowulf* is not just a story told in one place (Britain) about another (Scandinavia) —it is also told in one time about an earlier time. In history, there is



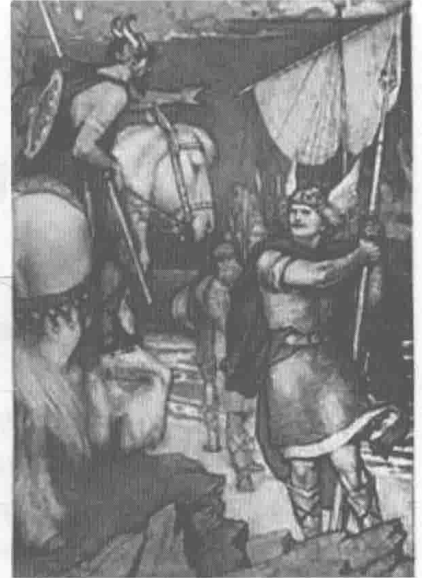
First page of *Beowulf*^①

^① Source from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beowulf>.

no evidence of a real hero as Beowulf, but some of the characters, sites and events in this poem can be historically verified.

Selected Reading

Beowulf tells of two major events in the life of the Geatish hero Beowulf. In his youth, he fights and kills Grendel, a monster who has been attacking Heorot, the hall of the Danish king Hroegar, and then he kills Grendel's mother who comes the next night to avenge her son; fifty years later, Beowulf, who has for a long time been the king of the Geats, fights with a dragon who attacks his people. In the combat both Beowulf and the dragon are mortally wounded. *Beowulf* closes with the king's funeral and a lament for the dead hero.



Beowulf is challenged by a Danish coast guard. ①

Though it is composed in the English vernacular, the language has changed so much that modern readers will find it difficult to understand.

The excerpt below comes with a contemporary verse translation. The original is a stanza that comes near the end of the poem. Beowulf, now an old king who has ruled the Geats for fifty years, must fight with a fierce flying dragon that guards a treasure hoard and terrorizes the region. These lines tell the history of the treasure: it is the accumulated wealth of a tribe of warriors which has perished. The last survivor of the tribe carries the treasure to the barrow where his people are buried and speaks these words on the transience of earthly things. This excerpt is believed to be the famous part of this national epic.

Beowulf

[The Last Survivor's Speech] ②

“Heald þu nu, hruse, nu hæleð ne mostan,
eorla æhte! Hwæt, hyt ær on ðe
gode begeaton. Guþ-deað fornam,
feorh-bealo frecne, fyra gehwylcne
leoda minra, þara ðe þis lif ofgeaf,
gesawon sele-dreamas. Nah hwa sweord wege
oððe feormie fæted wæge,
drync fæt deore; duguð ellor scoc.”

2250

① Source from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beowulf>.

② Abrams, M. H. et al. (Eds.). (1986). *The Norton anthology of English literature* (5th ed.). New York: Norton, 30–31.

1.2 Introduction to the Ballad

The popular ballad is a form of anonymous narrative song, “transmitted orally, which tells a story”^②. Typically, the popular ballad is condensed and impersonal: the narrator begins with a dramatic or exciting episode, and tells the story tersely in actions and dialogues (sometimes by means of dialogues alone) without self-reference or personal feelings.

Though the ballad is a form which is still written, “popular ballad” in most literatures belongs to the early periods before written literature was highly developed. “The origins of the popular (or folk) ballad are much disputed. The theory that they were first composed by communal effort, taking shape as the songs with which primitive people accompanied ritual dances, no longer seems plausible”.^③

The English ballads probably came into being during the five-hundred-year period since 1200. “‘Judas’, which exists in a thirteenth-century manuscript, is the oldest English ballad preserved in writing”.^④ However, having been passed down mainly by oral tradition since the Middle Ages, the ballads do not have any known author or a correct version. They remained an oral tradition until the increased interest in folk songs in the 18th century led collectors to publish volumes of popular ballads. Thomas Percy, Irish Anglican Bishop (1729 – 1811) created a new interest in ballads and their connection to folk poetry. They had long been ignored within literary circles. With his collection of ballads, Percy has been acknowledged to have inspired countless other English Romantic poets even as ballads themselves were losing popularity.

Ballads were originally songs which told a story. Traditional ballads are rhymed verse usually dedicated to sharing something about life with common folk who were otherwise illiterate. With subjects that were tragic, comedy, or heroic, simple people were informed about their culture. Also, they must not only tell a story in verse but also lend themselves to being sung, so the narrative and style must be simple enough to be followed at a hearing. “The simplicity of the tunes to which they were sung not only influenced the distinctive verse form—normally a quatrain with four stresses per line—but also encouraged a corresponding simplicity



Traditional Ballad^①

① Source from: <http://jonandrika.org/the-ballads/>.

② Abrams, M. H., & Geoffrey, G. H. (2009). *A glossary of literary terms* (9th ed.). Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 21.

③ Abrams, M. H. et al. (Eds.). (1986). *The Norton anthology of English literature* (5th ed.). New York: Norton, 378.

④ Bold, A. N. (1979). *The ballad*. London: Methuen, 5.

in the narrative itself, and made individualizing flourishes impossible”^①. Another common feature of ballads is the choral practice of using refrains and other kinds of repetition, sometimes of the fourth lines in succeeding stanzas, as a refrain, sometimes of the third and fourth lines of a stanza and sometimes of the entire stanzas.

Selected Reading

The great collection of English ballads is that of F. J. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, “a collection of over 300 traditional songs from England and Scotland”^③. It was published between 1882 and 1898 by Houghton Mifflin in ten volumes and later was reissued in a five-volume edition. “Robin Hood and the Three Squires” is one of the most famous stories in the collection. The excerpt below is in the second version in the *Child Ballad 140* collections. It is a narrative poem about one of Robin Hood’s most famous exploits that he uses a disguise to trick his enemies.

Robin Hood, while on his way to Nottingham, meets an old woman who is weeping for three squires condemned to die that day, not for serious crimes, but for killing the king’s deer. He then meets an old palmer, who confirms the bad news. He changes clothes with the palmer who at first takes the proposal as a mock. After he disguises himself as the palmer, Robin Hood enters Nottingham to offer his service as the hangman and asks the sheriff what he will give to his old fellow. The sheriff offers suits and pence; Robin says, hangmen be cursed, he will never take to that business. He has a horn in his pocket which will blow the sheriff little good; the sheriff bids him blow his horn. The first blast brings a hundred and fifty of Robin’s men; the second brings three score more. They free their own men and hang the sheriff.



Robin Hood statue in Nottingham^②

Robin Hood and the Three Squires^④

There are twelve months in all the year,
As I hear many men say,
But the merriest month in all the year
Is the merry month of May.

① Abrams, M. H. et al. (Eds.). (1986). *The Norton anthology of English literature* (5th ed.). New York: Norton, 30–31.

② Source from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Robin_Hood_Memorial.jpg.

③ San, Souci R. D., & Lewis, E. B. (2010). *Robin Hood and the golden arrow*. New York: Scholastic, 29.

④ Abrams, M. H. et al. (Eds.). (1986). *The Norton anthology of English literature* (5th ed.). New York: Norton, 387–390.

5 Now Robin Hood is to Nottingham gone,
With a link-a-down and a-day,
And there he met a silly old woman, *poor, innocent*
Was weeping on the way.

“What news? what news, thou silly old woman?”
10 What news hast thou for me?”
Said she, “There’s three squires in Nottingham town,
Today is condemned to dee.” *die*

“O have they parishes burnt?” he said,
“Or have they ministers slain?
15 Or have they robbed any virgin,
Or with other men’s wives have lain?”

“They have no parishes burnt, good sir,
Nor yet have ministers slain,
Nor have they robbed any virgin,
20 Nor with other men’s wives have lain.”

“O what have they done?” said bold Robin Hood,
“I pray thee tell to me.”
“It’s for slaying of the king’s fallow deer, *brown-red*
Bearing their longbows with thee.”

25 “Dost thou not mind, old woman,” he said, *remember*
“Since thou made me sup and dine?
By the truth of my body,” quoth bold Robin Hood,
“You could not tell it in better time.”

Now Robin Hood is to Nottingham gone,
30 With a link-a-down and a-day,
And there he met with a silly old palmer,
Was walking along the highway.

“What news? what news, thou silly old man?
What news, I do thee pray?”
35 Said he, “Three squires in Nottingham town

Are condemned to die this day. ”

“Come change thine apparel with me, old man,
Come change thine apparel for mine.
Here is forty shillings in good silver,
40 Go drink it in beer or wine. ”

“O thine apparel is good,” he said,
“And mine is ragged and torn.
Wherever you go, wherever you ride,
Laugh ne’er an old man to scorn. ”

45 “Come change thine apparel with me, old churl,
Come change thine apparel with mine:
Here are twenty pieces of good broad gold,
Go feast thy brethren with wine. ”

Then he put on the old man’s hat,
50 It stood full high on the crown:
“The first bold bargain that I come at,
It shall make thee come down. ”

Then he put on the old man’s cloak,
Was patched black, blue and red:
55 He thought it no shame all the day long
To wear the bags of bread.

Then he put on the old man’s breeks, ° *underbreeches*
Was patched from ballup to side:
“By the truth of my body,” bold Robin can° say, *did*
60 “This man loved little pride. ”

Then he put on the old man’s hose, ° *tights*
Were patched from knee to wrist:
“By the truth of my body,” said bold Robin Hood,
“I’d laugh if I had any list. ” ° *desire*

65 Then he put on the old man’s shoes,
Were patched both beneath and aboon: ° *above*

Then Robin Hood swore a solemn oath,
"It's good habit° that makes a man."

clothing

70 Now Robin Hood is to Nottingham gone,
With a link a down and a down,
And there he met with the proud sheriff,
Was walking along the town.

"O Christ you save, O sheriff," he said,
"O Christ you save and see;
75 And what will you give to a silly old man
Today will your hangman be?"

"Some suits, some suits," the sheriff he said,
"Some suits, I'll give to thee;
Some suits, some suits, and pence thirteen,
80 Today's a hangman's fee."

Then Robin he turns him round about,
And jumps from stock° to stone;
"By the truth of my body," the sheriff he said,
"That's well jumped, thou nimble old man."

stump

85 "I was ne'er a hangman in all my life,
Nor yet intends to trade;
But cursed be he," said bold Robin,
"That first a hangman was made.

90 "I've a bag for meal, and a bag for malt,
And a bag for barley and corn,
A bag for bread, and a bag for beef,
And a bag for my little small horn.

"I have a horn in my pocket;
I got it from Robin Hood;
95 And still when I set it to my mouth,
For thee it blows little good."

"O wind° thy horn, thou proud fellow:

blow

Of thee I have no doubt;°
 I wish that thou give such a blast
 100 Till both thy eyes fall out. ”

fear

The first loud blast that he did blow,
 He blew both loud and shrill,
 A hundred and fifty of Robin Hood’s men
 Came riding over the hill.

105 The next loud blast that he did give,
 He blew both loud and amain,
 And quickly sixty of Robin Hood’s men
 Came shining over the plain.

“O who are those,” the sheriff he said,
 110 “Come tripping over the lea?”°
 “They’re my attendants,” brave Robin did say,
 “They’ll pay a visit to thee. ”

meadow

They took the gallows from the slack,°
 They set it in the glen;
 115 They hanged the proud sheriff on that,
 Released their own three men.

hollow

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think Robin Hood treats the old woman, the palmer and the sheriff differently?
2. What functions does a dialogue play in ballads? Use this text to illustrate your views.

1.3 Geoffrey Chaucer (1343 – 1400)

Life and Works

Geoffrey Chaucer, known as the father of English poetry, is widely considered as the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages. The life of Chaucer is better documented than that of many a later writer. This is due to the fact that he entered service in one of the royal households at an early age and remained in public service for the rest of his life. His various duties and travels, together with the payments and gifts made to him, are therefore well documented in public records. Chaucer is not only considered as an author, scholar, philosopher, alchemist and astronomer, but he also maintained an active career in the civil service as a bureaucrat, courtier and diplomat.



Geoffrey Chaucer^①

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in the early 1340s, most probably in London. His father and grandfather were both vintners and several previous generations had been merchants in Ipswich. His family name derives from the “Old French *chaucier*...signified rather ‘a hosier’ than ‘a shoemaker’”^②. Chaucer’s father, originally a wine merchant, became tremendously wealthy who later increased his fortune through the inheritance of several properties. He was therefore able to send the young Chaucer off as a page to the Countess of Ulster, which meant that Chaucer was not required to follow his ancestors’ footsteps and become a merchant. Eventually, Chaucer began to serve Prince Lionel, son of King Edward III. In 1359, in the early stages of the Hundred Years’ War, Edward III invaded France and Chaucer accompanied with Prince Lionel, as part of the English army. Chaucer took part in the war with France before he was twenty, and in 1367 he worked for the king both as a soldier and a diplomat since his knowledge of languages (he knew Italian as well as French and Latin) was among the skills which singled him out for diplomatic missions to Spain in 1366 and to Italy in 1372 – 1373 and 1378. “Chaucer’s career has traditionally been divided into three distinct periods—the French (1355 – 1370), the Italian (1370 – 1385), and the English (1385 – 1400) —on the basis of the styles he was imitating and the writers he was

① Source from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoffrey_Chaucer.

② Skest, W. W. (1900). *Complete works of Geoffrey Chaucer*. New York: Cosimo Classics.