

MEDALLION EDITION • AMERICA READS

ENGLAND in Literature



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Helen McDonnell

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Scott, Foresman and Company

Editorial Offices: Glenview, Illinois

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ISBN: 0-673-12921-7 (Macbeth)
ISBN: 0-673-12922-5 (Hamlet)

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Printed in the United States of America.

2345678910-RRW-A-85848382818079
2345678910-RRW-B-85848382818079

Contents

Unit 1

The Anglo Saxons

450–1100

2	Time Line
4	Background
6–31	Beowulf, Part I (trans. by Kevin Crossley-Holland)
9	Notes and Comments: <i>The Epic</i>
13	Notes and Comments: <i>The Poetry of BEOWULF</i>
33	Notes and Comments: <i>from GRENDL</i> by John Gardner
35	Notes and Comments: <i>Beowulf</i> by Richard Wilbur
37	The Battle of Brunanburh (trans. by Burton Raffel)
38	Notes and Comments: <i>Brunanburh A. D. 937</i> by Jorge Luis Borges
39	The Wanderer (trans. by Kevin Crossley-Holland)
43	Notes and Comments: <i>The Wanderer</i> by W. H. Auden
44	The Husband's Message (trans. by Burton Raffel)
45	The Wife's Lament (trans. by Charles Kennedy)
48	Anglo-Saxon Riddles (trans. by Michael Alexander)
49	<i>from Bede's History</i> (trans. by Leo Sherley-Price)
50	Notes and Comments: <i>The Exeter Book</i>
51	Notes and Comments: <i>Dark Age Glosses on the</i> <i>Venerable Bede</i> by Louis MacNeice
Unit Review/Tests	
53	Review
53	Test I, The Seafarer (trans. by Burton Raffel)
55	Test II, Composition

Unit 2

The Medieval Period

1100–1500

56	Time Line
58	Background
60	Lord Randal
61	The Unquiet Grave
62	Get Up and Bar the Door
64	Sir Patrick Spence
65	Notes and Comments: <i>The Ballad</i>
66-80	Prologue to the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer (trans. by Nevill Coghill)
68	Notes and Comments: <i>The Physiognomists</i>
73	Notes and Comments: <i>Chaucer the Satirist</i> by Rosemary Woolf
76	Notes and Comments: <i>Chaucer's Words to His Scribe</i>
81-95	The Wife of Bath's Tale by Geoffrey Chaucer (trans. by Nevill Coghill)
85	Notes and Comments: <i>Opinions of the Wife</i>
89	Notes and Comments: <i>How Original was Chaucer?</i> by F. N. Robinson
96	The Day of Destiny from <i>Morte Darthur</i> by Sir Thomas Malory
Unit Review/Tests	
104	Review
104	Test I, from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (trans. by Brian Stone)
109	Test II, Composition

Unit 3

The Renaissance

1500–1650

- 110 Time Line
112 Background
- 116 **Whoso List to Hunt** by Sir Thomas Wyatt
116 **A Lover's Vow** by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey
117 **from Certain Books of Virgil's Aeneid**
by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey
- 118 **When I Was Fair and Young** by Elizabeth I
119 **To Plead My Faith** by Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex
119 **What Is Our Life?** by Sir Walter Raleigh
119 Notes and Comments: *The Death of Raleigh*
120 **To Queen Elizabeth** by Sir Walter Raleigh
121 **from The Faerie Queene** by Edmund Spenser
124 Notes and Comments: *The Spenserian Stanza*
125 Notes and Comments: *Allegory*
126 **The Passionate Shepherd to His Love**
by Christopher Marlowe
- 126 **The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd**
by Sir Walter Raleigh
- 127 **Sonnet 30** from *Amoretti* by Edmund Spenser
127 **Sonnet 31** from *Astrophel and Stella* by Sir Philip Sidney
128 **Heart Exchange** by Sir Philip Sidney
128 Notes and Comments: *i carry your heart*
by E. E. Cummings
- 129 **The Man of Life Upright** by Thomas Campion
129 **Never Love Unless You Can** by Thomas Campion
129 **When to Her Lute Corinna Sings** by Thomas Campion
130 **Sonnet 18, Shall I compare thee . . .**
by William Shakespeare
- 130 **Sonnet 130, My mistress' eyes . . .**
by William Shakespeare
- 131 **Sonnet 29, When in disgrace . . .**
by William Shakespeare
- 131 **Sonnet 30, When to the sessions . . .**
by William Shakespeare
- 131 **Sonnet 55, Not marble . . .** by William Shakespeare
131 **Sonnet 71, No longer mourn for me . . .**
by William Shakespeare
- 132 **Sonnet 73, That time of year . . .**
by William Shakespeare

*The MEDALLION EDITION of *England in Literature* is available in two versions, one containing *Hamlet*, the other *Macbeth*. Thus two listings appear in the Table of Contents and in the index although only one of the two plays will be found in this book.

132	Sonnet 116, Let me not to the marriage . . . by William Shakespeare
136-203	Hamlet * by William Shakespeare
137	Act One
152	Notes and Comments: <i>The Creation of the First Folio</i>
154	Act Two
165	Act Three
179	Act Four
190	Act Five
136-203	Macbeth * by William Shakespeare
137	Act One
151	Act Two
154	Notes and Comments: <i>The Role of Lady Macbeth</i>
162	Act Three
172	Notes and Comments: <i>The Witch-Scenes in MACBETH</i> by A. C. Bradley
176	Act Four
188	<i>Shakespeare's Theater—The Globe</i>
190	Act Five
199	Notes and Comments: <i>The Character of Macbeth</i> by A. C. Bradley
204	The Creation of the World from <i>The King James Bible</i>
208	The Twenty-third Psalm from <i>The Great Bible</i>
208	The Twenty-third Psalm from <i>The King James Bible</i>
208	The Twenty-third Psalm from <i>The Bay Psalm Book</i>
208	The Twenty-third Psalm from <i>The New English Bible</i>
209	Of Studies by Sir Francis Bacon
211	Song by John Donne
211	The Bait by John Donne
212	The Canonization by John Donne
213	A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning by John Donne
213	Notes and Comments: <i>Donne's Puns</i>
214	Sonnet 7 from <i>Holy Sonnets</i> by John Donne
214	Sonnet 10 from <i>Holy Sonnets</i> by John Donne
214	Sonnet 14 from <i>Holy Sonnets</i> by John Donne
215	Meditation 17 by John Donne
216	On My First Son by Ben Jonson
216	To Cynthia by Ben Jonson
216	Notes and Comments: <i>Ben Jonson's Vision of His Son</i>
217	It was a Beauty That I Saw by Ben Jonson
217	Song, to Celia by Ben Jonson
218	To Althea, from Prison by Richard Lovelace
218	To Lucasta, on Going to the Wars by Richard Lovelace
219	To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time by Robert Herrick

219	The Constant Lover by Sir John Suckling
220	What Care I? by George Wither
221	To His Coy Mistress by Andrew Marvell
222	Notes and Comments: <i>You, Andrew Marvell</i> by Archibald MacLeish
223	The Garden by Andrew Marvell
225	On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-three by John Milton
225	On His Blindness by John Milton
226	from Paradise Lost, Book 1 by John Milton
Unit Review/Tests	
235	Review
235	Test I, from Richard II, Act Three by William Shakespeare
239	Test II, Composition

Unit 4

The Age of Reason

1650–1780

240	Time Line
242	Background
244	from The Hind and the Panther by John Dryden
248	Notes and Comments: <i>Dryden and the Heroic Couplet</i>
247	To the Memory of Mr. Oldham by John Dryden
249	from The Diary of Samuel Pepys
256	A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General by Jonathan Swift
257	A Description of a City Shower by Jonathan Swift
259	A Modest Proposal by Jonathan Swift
265	from The Spectator by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele
271	Epistle to Miss Blount by Alexander Pope
272	from An Essay on Criticism by Alexander Pope
274	from An Essay on Man by Alexander Pope
275	from the Dictionary of the English Language by Samuel Johnson
277	Letter to Chesterfield by Samuel Johnson
278	from the Life of Milton by Samuel Johnson
281	On the Death of Mr. Robert Levet by Samuel Johnson

	283	from The Life of Samuel Johnson by James Boswell
	288	Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard by Thomas Gray
	290	Sonnet on the Death of Richard West by Thomas Gray
	291	To a Mouse by Robert Burns
	292	A Red, Red Rose by Robert Burns
Unit Review/Tests	294	Review
	294	Test 1, from A Journal of the Plague Year by Daniel Defoe
	297	Test II, Composition

Unit 5

The Romantics

1780–1830

298	Time Line
300	Background
302	Introduction from <i>Songs of Innocence</i> by William Blake
302	Introduction from <i>Songs of Experience</i> by William Blake
303	The Lamb from <i>Songs of Innocence</i> by William Blake
303	The Tyger from <i>Songs of Experience</i> by William Blake
304	Holy Thursday from <i>Songs of Innocence</i> by William Blake
304	Holy Thursday from <i>Songs of Experience</i> by William Blake
305	The Divine Image from <i>Songs of Innocence</i> by William Blake
305	The Human Abstract from <i>Songs of Experience</i> by William Blake
306	Proverbs of Hell by William Blake
307	Notes and Comments: <i>What Did Blake Mean by Innocence and Experience?</i> by Morton D. Paley
309	The World Is Too Much With Us by William Wordsworth
309	It Is a Beauteous Evening by William Wordsworth
310	Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802 by William Wordsworth
310	London, 1802 by William Wordsworth

312	Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey by William Wordsworth
316	Frost at Midnight by Samuel Taylor Coleridge
317	Kubla Khan by Samuel Taylor Coleridge
318	Notes and Comments: <i>Coleridge's Remarks About</i> KUBLA KHAN
320	When We Two Parted by George Gordon, Lord Byron
321	She Walks in Beauty by George Gordon, Lord Byron
321	So, We'll Go No More A-roving by George Gordon, Lord Byron
322	from Canto #1, Don Juan by George Gordon, Lord Byron
329	England in 1819 by Percy Bysshe Shelley
329	Ozymandias by Percy Bysshe Shelley
330	Ode to the West Wind by Percy Bysshe Shelley
332	When I Have Fears by John Keats
332	This Living Hand by John Keats
333	Ode on a Grecian Urn by John Keats
334	Ode to a Nightingale by John Keats
336	The Eve of St. Agnes by John Keats
344	On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth by Thomas De Quincey
347	from A Vindication of the Rights of Woman by Mary Wollstonecraft
350	Notes and Comments: <i>Mary Wollstonecraft</i> by Virginia Woolf
Unit Review/Tests	
354	Review
354	Test I, from The Prelude, Book 1 by William Wordsworth
357	Test II, Composition

Unit 6

The Victorians

1830–1880

358	Time Line
360	Background
362	Ulysses by Alfred, Lord Tennyson
364	from In Memoriam by Alfred, Lord Tennyson
365	The Passing of Arthur from <i>Idylls of the King</i> by Alfred, Lord Tennyson
373	Porphyria's Lover by Robert Browning

374	My Last Duchess by Robert Browning
376	Notes and Comments: <i>The Dramatic Monologue</i>
377	Dover Beach by Matthew Arnold
378	Self-Dependence by Matthew Arnold
379	Ah! Why, Because the Dazzling Sun by Emily Brontë
380	The Night Wind by Emily Brontë
381	I'll Not Weep by Emily Brontë
382	I Thought Once How . . . from <i>Sonnets from the Portuguese</i> by Elizabeth Barrett Browning
382	Unlike Are We . . . from <i>Sonnets from the Portuguese</i> by Elizabeth Barrett Browning
383	When Our Two Souls . . . from <i>Sonnets from the Portuguese</i> by Elizabeth Barrett Browning
383	My Letter, All Dead Paper . . . from <i>Sonnets from the Portuguese</i> by Elizabeth Barrett Browning
383	How Do I Love Thee . . . from <i>Sonnets from the Portuguese</i> by Elizabeth Barrett Browning
384	from <i>Monna Innominata, Sonnet 2</i> by Christina Rossetti
384	Shut Out by Christina Rossetti
386	Alice's Adventures Under Ground by Lewis Carroll
409	The Lifted Veil by George Eliot
Unit Review/Tests	
436	Review
436	Test I, from On The Subjection of Women by John Stuart Mill
439	Test II, Composition

Unit 7

New Directions

1880–1915

440	Time Line
442	Background
447	Pied Beauty by Gerard Manley Hopkins
447	God's Grandeur by Gerard Manley Hopkins
448	Spring and Fall by Gerard Manley Hopkins
448	Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord by Gerard Manley Hopkins
449	Notes and Comments: <i>Imagery in "God's Grandeur"</i>
450	The Man He Killed by Thomas Hardy
450	Epitaph on a Pessimist by Thomas Hardy
451	Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave? by Thomas Hardy

452	At Castle Boterel by Thomas Hardy
453	Afterwards by Thomas Hardy
454	When I Was One-and-Twenty by A. E. Housman
454	Loveliest of Trees by A. E. Housman
454	To an Athlete Dying Young by A. E. Housman
455	Into My Heart an Air That Kills by A. E. Housman
455	Far in a Western Brookland by A. E. Housman
456	Notes and Comments: <i>Housman on Writing His Poetry</i>
457	The Lake Isle of Innisfree by William Butler Yeats
457	Notes and Comments: <i>On INNISFREE</i> by William Butler Yeats
458	When You Are Old by William Butler Yeats
459	Adam's Curse by William Butler Yeats
460	The Wild Swans at Coole by William Butler Yeats
461	Notes and Comments: <i>The Second Coming</i>
461	The Second Coming by William Butler Yeats
462	Sailing to Byzantium by William Butler Yeats
464	Notes and Comments: <i>Sailing to Byzantium</i> by Elder Olson
466	The Miracle of Purun Bhagat by Rudyard Kipling
475	The Lagoon by Joseph Conrad
481	Notes and Comments: <i>On the Sources of His Fiction</i> by Joseph Conrad
485	The Grave by the Handpost by Thomas Hardy
489	Notes and Comments: <i>Pessimism in Literature</i> by E. M. Forster
493	The Star by H. G. Wells
496	Notes and Comments: <i>Science Fiction</i> by C. S. Lewis
502	Spellbound by George Gissing
511	Pygmalion by Bernard Shaw
512	Act One
519	Act Two
535	Act Three
547	Act Four
563	Epilogue
558	Notes and Comments: <i>The Comedy of Ideas</i>
Unit Review/Tests	
571	Review
572	Test I, from Major Barbara, Act One by Bernard Shaw
575	Test II, Composition

Unit 8

The Twentieth Century

1915

Poetry:

576	Time Line
578	Background
582	Suicide in the Trenches by Siegfried Sassoon
582	Dreamers by Siegfried Sassoon
583	The Next War by Wilfred Owen
584	The Hollow Men by T. S. Eliot
586	The Journey of the Magi by T. S. Eliot
588	The King of China's Daughter by Edith Sitwell
589	Intimates by D. H. Lawrence
590	Read Me, Please by Robert Graves
591	Sullen Moods by Robert Graves
591	She tells her love while half asleep by Robert Graves
592	Musée des Beaux Arts by W. H. Auden
594	The Unknown Citizen by W. H. Auden
595	Who's Who by W. H. Auden
596	An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum by Stephen Spender
597	Walking Away by C. Day Lewis
598	The British Museum Reading Room by Louis MacNeice
599	The Snow Man by Louis MacNeice
600	The Frog Prince by Stevie Smith
602	No Respect by Stevie Smith
602	Not Waving but Drowning by Stevie Smith
603	Alone in the Woods by Stevie Smith
604	The Force That Through The Green Fuse Drives the Flower by Dylan Thomas
605	Notes and Comments: <i>The Force That Through . . .</i>
606	Fern Hill by Dylan Thomas
607	Notes and Comments: <i>Fern Hill</i>
608	Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night by Dylan Thomas
609	Notes and comments: <i>The Villanelle</i>
610	The O-Filler by Alastair Reid
612	At Grass by Philip Larkin
612	The Explosion by Philip Larkin
613	Homage to a Government by Philip Larkin
614	The Climbers by Elizabeth Jennings

615	Not in the Guidebooks by Elizabeth Jennings
616	The Secret Sharer by Thom Gunn
617	The Annihilation of Nothing by Thom Gunn
618	Fern by Ted Hughes
618	Bullfrog by Ted Hughes
619	Esther's Tomcat by Ted Hughes
620	Six Young Men by Ted Hughes
622	Journey Through the Night by John Holloway
624	P. C. Plod Vs. the Dale St. Dog Strangler by Roger McGough

Fiction:	626	Tobermory by Saki
	632	Eveline by James Joyce
	635	The Legacy by Virginia Woolf
	639	Notes and Comments: <i>Women and Fiction</i> by Virginia Woolf
	640	Tickets, Please by D. H. Lawrence
	647	The Doll's House by Katherine Mansfield
	652	Tears, Idle Tears by Elizabeth Bowen
	657	A Shocking Accident by Graham Greene
	662	My Oedipus Complex by Frank O'Connor
	670	Three Shots for Charlie Betson by Leslie Norris
	679	Three Miles Up by Elizabeth Jane Howard

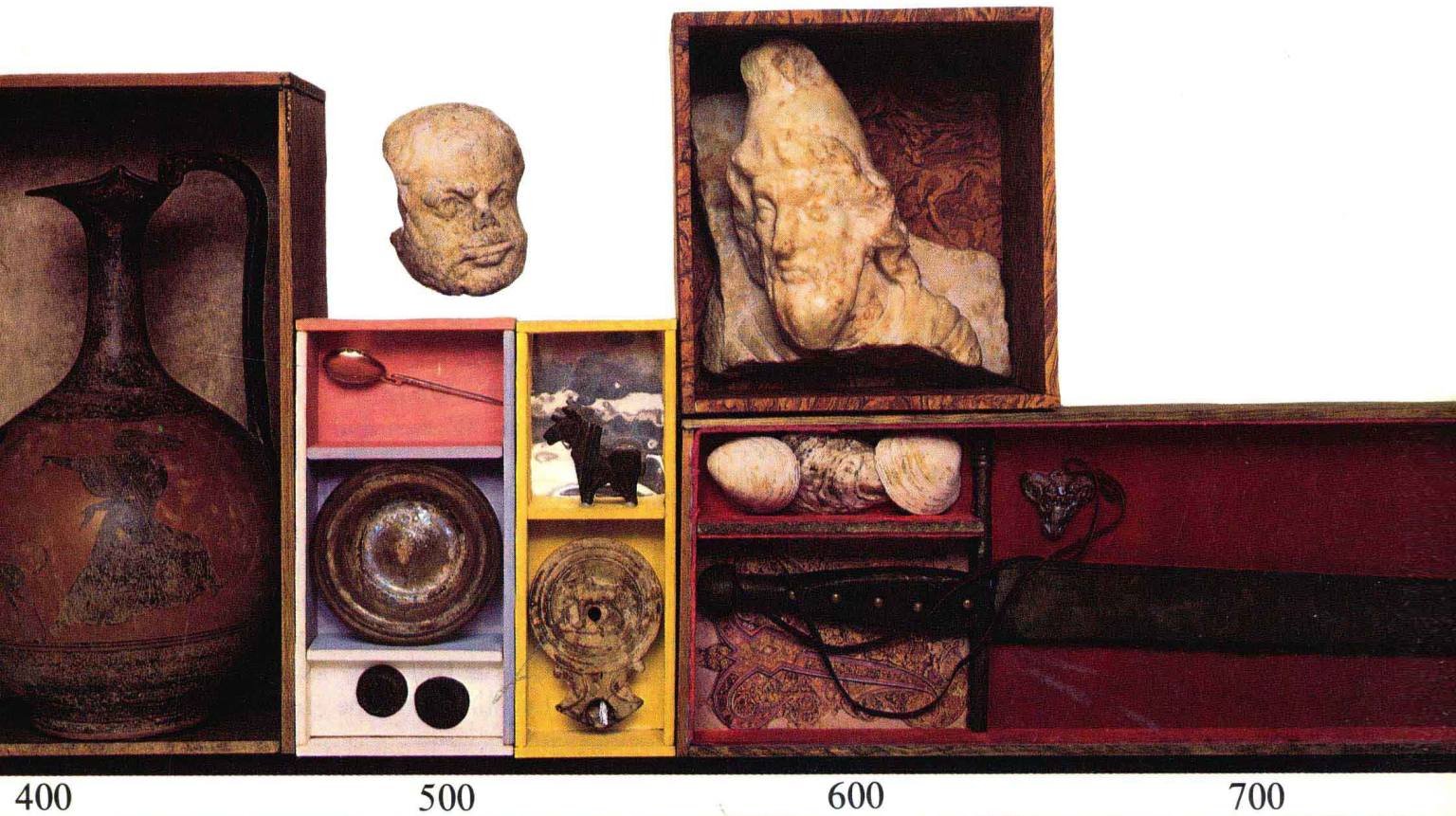
Essays:	690	Three Pictures by Virginia Woolf
	692	Why I Write by George Orwell
	697	Reminiscences by Dylan Thomas
	701	from Going Home by Doris Lessing

Unit Review/Tests	704	Review
	704	Test I, Germans at Meat by Katherine Mansfield
	707	Test II, Composition

708	Definitions of Literary Terms*
717	Pronunciation Key
718	Glossary
733	Time Line Notes
734	Index of Authors and Titles
738	Index of Extension Assignments
738	Index of Vocabulary Exercises

*Items in *Definitions of Literary terms* when introduced in the editorial material accompanying selections are printed in **boldface**.

Unit 1:



- Roman withdrawal from Britain begins

- Anglo-Saxon invasion begins

- Roman Christian missionaries arrive

Bede's *History* concludes •

- Sutton Hoo Ship burial

Beowulf composed

- Death of Hygelac, Beowulf's kinsman

- Synod of Whitby

The Anglo-Saxons 450-1100



800

900

1000

1100

Reign of Alfred the Great

- Battle of Maldon

- *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* begins

- Battle of Hastings

- Vikings seize Normandy

- Battle of Brunanburh

Beowulf manuscript

Background: The Anglo-Saxons 450-1100



Britain, as a place, was first mentioned by ancient Greek writers. To the Greeks, Britain was a legendary place—remote and mysterious. The Romans found the island occupied by Celtic Britons, who were related to the Celtic peoples of Western Europe conquered by the Romans. During the fifth century, when the Roman Empire was crumbling, the Romans withdrew, leaving the Celtic peoples to find their own means of defense.

Despite a brief period of military success under the leadership of the individual who became the King Arthur of medieval legend, the culture of the Romanized Celts of Britain had collapsed by 600 under the attacks of a variety of enemies, principally German tribes from across the North Sea. For the following two hundred and fifty years (600–850), the Anglo-Saxons—a multitude of wealthy, independent lords and kings—fought among themselves, with many kingdoms rising and falling.

To add to the plight of the Anglo-Saxons as they fought to protect their own petty kingdoms, Viking Danes began to attack during the second half of the ninth century. Under the leadership of Alfred the Great (871–899), and, later, his grandson, Athelstan (925–940), the Danes were defeated, but the country was not united under an Anglo-Saxon king until the middle of the eleventh century. However, their unified land did not survive for very long. In 1066 they were once again invaded. Their conquerors, the Normans from across the English Channel, instituted their own culture, thus bringing to a close the Anglo-Saxon epoch of English history.

Anglo-Saxon Culture

When the Anglo-Saxons came to England, they brought with them a relatively well-developed society organized

around the family, the clan, the tribe, and finally the kingdom. The *eorls* (ērlz), the ruling class, and the *ceorls* (chērlz), bondsmen whose ancestors were former captives of the tribe, made up the two classes of Anglo-Saxon society. Although he was considered to be an absolute ruler, the king relied heavily on advice from a council, the *witan* (“wise men”). For example, in the selection from Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, King Edwin consults his *witan* before converting to Christianity.

The center of the Anglo-Saxons’ social life was the mead hall. As part of the celebrations in the mead hall, professional singers or bards, called *scops*, entertained by recounting stories of brave heroes and by serving as resident poet and chronicler for the king and his tribe. These entertainers were responsible for preserving much of the literature of the time by keeping it alive until it was written down by