

The McGraw-Hill Guide to
ENGLISH
LITERATURE

Volume One
Beowulf to Jane Austen

By
Karen Lawrence, Betsy Seifter,
and Lois Ratner



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THE MCGRAW-HILL GUIDE TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

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This book is dedicated to our three supportive husbands, Peter Lawrence, Julian Seifter, and Stephen Ratner, and to the children who came into being during the seven years of its composition: Andrew and Jeffrey, Andrew and Charles, and Philip and Peter.

PREFACE

Like a guide who leads his companions through unfamiliar terrain, making sense of the territory, this book attempts to illuminate some of the vast expanse of English literature. The uniqueness of *The McGraw-Hill Guide to English Literature* lies in its format and completeness. It provides questions and answers on works by almost all the major authors of English literature, from medieval to modern. By example rather than prescription, the guide attempts to teach students fruitful ways to think and write about different kinds of literature, including fiction, poetry, drama, and the essay. The dual purpose of the guide is to demonstrate general approaches to literature and to give useful analyses of specific texts that college students are likely to encounter in their classes. This book certainly is not meant to replace the study of the texts themselves, but is intended instead as a useful supplement to them. Without sacrificing the richness, complexity, or variety of English literature, we attempt to cover the most significant aspects of these texts.

The guide appears in two volumes, corresponding to the division in most year-long survey courses and anthologies. Volume One includes Old English through eighteenth-century literature and is divided into seven parts: Old English Literature, Middle English Literature, the Renaissance, the Seventeenth Century, the Restoration, the Neoclassical Age, and the Emergence of the Novel. Volume Two includes nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, and has five parts: the Romantic Age, Victorian Poetry and Prose, the Victorian Novel, Modern Poetry, and the Modern Novel and Drama. To provide a context for the discussions of individual texts, each part is introduced with a timeline which charts important political and literary events of the period. Chapters correspond to individual authors (except, of course, in the case of anonymous texts), and for each author there is a short chronology, which lists important dates and events in his or her life. In addition, each chapter includes a list of

suggested readings for further study. The initials at the end of each chapter indicate the writer responsible for the material in that chapter.

This book is envisioned as primarily for the college student who desires help in the study of English literature. Although some students may want to read through the guide, most will dip into it for help on particular writers being studied. It may prove particularly useful in preparing the student for the type of essay exams likely to be encountered in literature courses. The guide should also be a valuable resource for the teacher as well as the student of literature, who will find it a repository of significant questions on, as well as helpful analyses of, individual texts. As teachers of literature, we have tried to provide material that is very beneficial to class preparation.

No other guide of this kind and comprehensiveness exists today. We hope that students and teachers will find *The McGraw-Hill Guide* a helpful and stimulating companion in their study of literature.

K. L.

B. S.

L. R.

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In the seven years from the conception of this project to its fruition, a few people have been indispensable to our efforts. Chief among them is Barry Weller at the University of Utah, who read the manuscript in draft form and offered us the benefit of his considerable critical intelligence. He made insightful changes, both editorial and substantive, throughout the work, but particularly in Part Four, *The Seventeenth Century*.

Karl Weber has been the other significant participant in this enterprise, and for Karl's editorial expertise we are extremely grateful. In addition, he is responsible for the *Chronologies* in Volume One.

Finally, we would like to thank Karl Weber and Teresa Carriero for their joint efforts in producing the *Timelines*.

K. L.

B. S.

L. R.

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Part One

OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE





T I M E L I N E

The Age

- 449: Invasion of England by Jutes, led by Hengist. Angles and Saxons soon follow
- 476: Fall of Roman Empire
- 484: First schism between western and eastern churches
- 550: Conversion of Wales to Christianity by St. David
- 563: St. Columba founds monastery on Isle of Iona
- 597: St. Augustine sent by Pope Gregory I to convert Anglo-Saxon England to Christianity
- 671: Birth of Caedmon, first English poet
- 700: Translation of the Psalms into Old English
- 735: Death of Bede, monk and first English historian
- 771: Charlemagne becomes ruler of the Franks
- 800: By this date, Danish raids on England have begun; wars with Danes continue through 9th century. Charlemagne crowned Holy Roman Emperor
- 849: Birth of King Alfred the Great
- 871: Alfred becomes king of West Saxony. By his death in 899 has united England
- 878: Alfred recaptures London from Danes
- 994: Successful Danish invasion of England; King Sweyn founds a short-lived English-Danish dynasty
- 1066: Death of King Edward the Confessor; accession of Saxon king Harold. Norman king William conquers England; Norman French becomes the literary, governmental language of England until about 1300

The Authors

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700 Probable date of composition of *Beowulf* (700–750)

750

800

850

900

950

1000 Probable date of *Beowulf* manuscript (1000)

1050

1100



BEOWULF

C H R O N O L O G Y

- A.D.43 Roman Emperor Claudius sends an army of 40,000 to conquer Britain, which is inhabited by a number of Celtic tribes. Within about three years, most of the island has been subjugated. For the next three centuries, romanization of Britain advances slowly.
- 314 Christianity, by this time both tolerated and widespread within the Roman Empire, has made some progress in Britain, as indicated by the presence of bishops from London and York at a church council in Gaul (modern-day France).
- 410 Now in decline, the Roman Empire withdraws from Britain. Both the Latin language and Christianity decline in influence in Britain as a result.
- 449 Beginning of the invasion of Britain by a group of Teutonic tribes: the Jutes and the Angles from what is now Denmark, and the Saxons and Frisians from what are now Germany and the Low Countries. These invaders, over the next century, will push the native British Celts west and north, virtually eradicating their language and culture and replacing them with their own Teutonic dialects and Germanic warrior culture. From the Teutonic speech of these so-called Anglo-Saxons the English language will develop.
- 520 Known date of a raid by Hygelac, king of the Geats (a tribe in what is now Sweden), on the Frisians. Hygelac is mentioned in *Beowulf* as the Geatish king during the youth of Beowulf, himself a Geat. Therefore, to the extent that the events recounted in *Beowulf* are historically based, they may be dated in the early years of the sixth century.

- 525 Death of Hrothgar, king of the Danes and a prominent character in *Beowulf*.
- 597 Pope Gregory I appoints St. Augustine (not the bishop of Hippo but a Roman Benedictine monk) head of a mission charged with converting the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of Britain to Christianity. Within about a century, almost all of Britain will have been converted to Christianity. The Germanic warrior code of heroism will not die overnight, however; rather, it will mingle with and influence the now-dominant Christian ethical system, so that literary works such as *Beowulf* will represent a combination of pagan and Christian elements.
- 669 Theodore of Tarsus, a Greek bishop, is named archbishop of Canterbury. He establishes a school at which the Greek and Latin languages are taught, thus facilitating the spread throughout Britain of classical culture. By the end of the eighth century, Britain will boast an appreciable number of scholars able to read Virgil's *Aeneid* and other classical epics, which may thus have exercised a direct or indirect influence on Old English heroic poems such as *Beowulf*.
- 700–750 The most probable period of composition of *Beowulf*, though some scholars claim that the poem dates from the late seventh century, while others put it as late as the early ninth century. Around this time a *scop*, that is, a professional court poet, either wrote *Beowulf* or, more likely, transcribed his own version of an orally transmitted folk epic dealing with the *Beowulf* story. It is not known where *Beowulf* was written, although West Mercia (now known as the West Midlands) is the most likely location.
- 1000 Approximate date at which the so-called *Beowulf* manuscript, containing the only extant text of the poem, was produced. It is likely that two or three transcriptions of the poem intervened between its original composition and the writing of the manuscript we have. One of four surviving manuscripts which contain almost all known Old English poetry, the *Beowulf* manuscript also includes other texts, such as a fabulous life of St. Christopher, a collection of travelers' tales called *Wonders of the East*, and a *Letter of Alexander the Great to Aristotle*. Nothing is known of the history of this manuscript until the seventeenth century.
- 1066 Date of the Norman conquest of England, which will place the country under French rule and virtually eliminate the use of Old English as a literary language. When English reemerges in the thirteenth century, it will have been transformed by the Norman influence, making the purely Teutonic language of *Beowulf* into a foreign tongue for all later English-speaking generations.
- 1571 Birth of Sir Robert Cotton, renowned antiquarian and book collector, who obtained the *Beowulf* manuscript for his library at Ashburnham House. From

Beowulf

its presence in the famous Cotton Collection comes the manuscript's technical designation as Cotton Vitellius A.xv.

- 1731 The *Beowulf* manuscript is damaged in a fire at Ashburnham House; some lines and words are lost, though not enough to render the text unintelligible. The manuscript is removed to the British Museum in London, where it remains to this day.