

中世纪文学的 核心概念

Key Concepts in
Medieval Literature

Elizabeth Solopova and Stuart D. Lee



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近年来,文学研究的理论和方法取得了不少新的进展。为了帮助文学专业学生及广大文学研究者、爱好者迅速而有效地掌握文学研究的核心概念和背景资料,外教社特从 Palgrave 出版社遴选引进了这套权威、实用的“Palgrave 文学核心概念丛书”。

本套丛书堪称浓缩的文学百科辞典,各分册大多按研究主题分为不同板块,每一册都按字母表顺序列出精选的核心词条,词条下大多附有补充书目,书后基本附有编年史、参考文献和索引,个别分册还根据实际需要设置了习题。丛书文献丰富,语言精炼,编排合理,查阅方便,是不可多得的文学类学术工具书和阅读参考资料。

相信本套丛书的引进将满足我国广大文学专业的师生及其他文学研究者、爱好者的需求,有力推动我国文学研究的发展与繁荣。

Key Concepts in Medieval Literature

Elizabeth Solopova and Stuart D. Lee

To Anastasia, Michael, Maurice, and Truda

General Editors' Preface

The purpose of Palgrave Key Concepts in Literature is to provide students with key critical and historical ideas about the texts they are studying as part of their literature courses. These ideas include information about the historical and cultural contexts of literature as well as the theoretical approaches current in the subject today. Behind the series lies a recognition of the need nowadays for students to be familiar with a range of concepts and contextual material to inform their reading and writing about literature.

But behind the series there also lies a recognition of the changes that have transformed degree courses in Literature in recent years. Central to these changes has been the impact of critical theory together with a renewed interest in the way in which texts intersect with their immediate context and historical circumstances. The result has been an opening up of new ways of reading texts and a new understanding of what the study of literature involves together with the introduction of a wide set of new critical issues that demand our attention. An important aim of Palgrave Key Concepts in Literature is to provide brief, accessible introductions to these new ways of reading and new issues.

Each volume in Palgrave Key Concepts in Literature follows a similar broad structure. Here, an initial chapter introducing the major key concepts is followed by three sections – Old English, Middle English and Approaches, Theory and Practice – each containing a sequence of brief entries on a series of topics. Alongside entries focussing on the works themselves, other entries provide an impression of the historical, social and cultural environment in which these literary texts were produced. In the final chapter, entries outline the manner in which approaches, theory and practice have affected the ways in which we discuss the texts featured in the present volume. The informing intention throughout is to help the reader create something new in the process of combining context, text and criticism.

John Peck
Martin Coyle

List of Abbreviations

| | |
|-----------|---|
| <i>c.</i> | <i>circa</i> |
| EETS e.s. | Early English Text Society, Extra Series |
| EETS o.s. | Early English Text Society, Original Series |
| EETS s.s. | Early English Text Society, Second Series |
| ELN | <i>English Language Notes</i> |
| ES | <i>English Studies</i> |
| JEGP | <i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i> |
| MA | <i>Medium Aevum</i> |
| MnE | Modern English |
| OE | Old English |
| PMLA | <i>Publications of the Modern Languages Association</i> |
| SP | <i>Studies in Philology</i> |
| SAC | <i>Studies in the Age of Chaucer</i> |

Introduction

This book sets out to present key themes, texts, terminologies, and methods related to a period of English literature we broadly term 'medieval'. In short, this covers the dates from some time in the mid-5th century to the third quarter of the 15th century – a period of over 1,000 years. The length of this time-span should not be forgotten, nor underestimated. It covers from the beginnings of English to the start of the Tudor dynasty. Any generalisations about the literature, people, or culture of the period should be avoided. To say there is complete commonality between the first settlers in the 5th century and the men and women who lived in the 15th century is akin to saying we ourselves have the same ideas and values as the people who lived around the year 1000.

Before this period England did not exist, but by the end of the medieval period it had become one of the most powerful nations in the world. Moreover, before the period, the notions of 'English' and 'the English' did not exist.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'medieval' as:

Of or relating to a period of time intervening between (periods designated as) ancient and modern; *spec.* of, relating to, or characteristic of the Middle Ages.

This definition is interesting as it illustrates one of the problems besetting the medieval period. It is often seen purely as a time 'in between', i.e. one between the glory of the ancient world of Rome and Greece, and the enlightenment of the Renaissance. This in turn can lead to a ready willingness to dismiss the period as somehow irrelevant; a cultural blot on the history of humanity. Yet, as we will see throughout this book, the achievements and legacy of the medieval period are of crucial importance to the study of the English language and its literature.

Taking the history of England alone, we can see a pivotal event occurring in the year 1066 which seems to neatly divide the period. This was the Norman Conquest, in which the throne of England

passed from the Anglo-Saxons to the Normans under William the Conqueror. This again, however, causes problems. The date 1066 presents scholars and students with an all-too-easy point to 'begin from', i.e. ignoring the earlier period up to the arrival of William. Yet we must not fall into the trap of seeing important historical dates as openings and closings of chapters. Instead, as is seen in this book and others (e.g. Treharne, 2004), we strongly advocate an approach of looking at the entire medieval period and beyond to see continuity in texts, language, and cultural themes.

To begin with, the terminology adopted in this book needs some explanation:

Medieval: this is used to refer to the historical period, occasionally to the people who lived there ('medieval women'), the language (e.g. Medieval English), and the literature. It is subdivided into the Early Medieval Period (5th to 11th century) and the Later Medieval Period (11th century to the third quarter of the 15th century).

Anglo-Saxon: this term refers to the races that ruled England from the mid-5th century until the Norman Conquest. It can also be used to refer to that historical period (e.g. 'Anglo-Saxon history'), but decreasingly now to the language and literature of the time (e.g. 'I am studying Anglo-Saxon'). The term has been much abused nowadays as it can stand as a collective adjective referring to Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the USA; or it can be used by right-wing political groups to refer to some nonsensical common Germanic ancestry.

Old English: this is the preferred term in literary and linguistic studies and describes the language and literature of the Anglo-Saxons. This is used nowadays as it immediately illustrates its place and continuity in the history of English.

Middle English: this refers to the period from the Norman Conquest until approximately the third quarter of the 15th century, and to the literature of this period. The date which is often taken to be the borderline between the Middle English and Early Modern periods is 1476, when William Caxton set up the first printing press in England.

As pointed out already, the borderlines between the periods in the history of English language and literature, marked by political rather

than cultural events, can be only conventional, because the development of language and literary evolution are gradual processes and happen continuously. The traditional division into periods, adopted in this book, is not meaningless, but is best understood with reference to what precedes and what follows each historical period. The Norman Conquest resulted in important cultural changes, such as the temporary loss of prestige which English, and the English, enjoyed during the Anglo-Saxon period. The end of the Old English period was also a time of significant linguistic changes many of which we can observe only in later post-Conquest texts, again making the Norman Conquest an artificial but nevertheless convenient borderline. The introduction of printing in the 15th century started a major change in how texts were produced, transmitted, and received. The end of the 15th century was also the time when the influence of the Italian Renaissance started to be felt in England, introducing new ideas and new trends in the development of literature and art.

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1 Introductory Key Concepts

(a) The Anglo-Saxon Period

Before we begin to discuss Old English literature it is essential to have a basic understanding of the historical events of the period, and the nature of Anglo-Saxon culture. This 'context-based' approach is one that is common to medieval literary studies. Linked to the study of the cultural aspects is the need for an understanding of the religion of the period, which, as will become increasingly clear, is essential to the discussions of its poetry and prose. It was, after all, the Christian monks of Anglo-Saxon England that copied, or were actually responsible for the composition of, much of Old English literature and therefore an awareness of the context in which they lived and worked is required.

The term 'Anglo-Saxon' is used generically to describe the period of English history from around the mid-5th century when the Angles and others arrived, to the year 1066, the beginning of the Norman Conquest, at which point the rule of England passed to the new invaders. 'Anglo-Saxon' is also used to refer to the people who occupied and ruled the land for those 600 years (i.e. *the* Anglo-Saxons). This apparently neat bracketing of history, however, belies a more complicated story. Britain was obviously inhabited before the Anglo-Saxons came, and these indigenous people were assimilated into Anglo-Saxon England (see below) or were driven to other lands. Moreover, even after the Norman Conquest the country was still predominantly occupied by Anglo-Saxons,¹ but by then they had become subservient to Norman rule. 'Anglo-Saxon' is also used occasionally to refer to the language and literature of the period (more so by earlier scholars) but the term 'Old English' is favoured now as it conveys the continuity of the language, i.e. from Old

¹ Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, for example, tells of a Saxon noble living in a much later period, and the equally fictional Robin Hood is also, according to some legends, a Saxon nobleman.

2 Introductory Key Concepts

English to Middle English to Modern English. However, even this categorisation by chronological period is misleading, and indeed should perhaps be abandoned (see Frantzen, 1990, p. 19) since it breaks up the real ebb and flow of language across time.

The Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain sometime in the mid-5th century with the collapse of Roman rule. They found there the indigenous Celts (or 'Brittonic') and the remnants of Romano-British society. Their original homeland was in the area of modern-day mainland Denmark and northern Germany. Economic necessity² and military ambitions no doubt sparked the migration. However, the legendary tale of a British chief called Vortigern hiring Saxon mercenaries who in turn rebel against him and seize lands, is one which clearly held an attraction for Anglo-Saxon writers themselves.

The early centuries, known as the 'migration period', involved gradual influxes and military incursions by people from three main tribes (according to Bede) – the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes; but other evidence points to settlements by other races such as the Franks and Frisians. It would appear the early incursions were on the east and south-east coasts of England. The complexity and chaos of the migration period can only be guessed at, but these warrior tribes eventually began to settle, forming dozens of kingdoms, at first either assimilating the locals or pushing them westwards and northwards to the traditional modern-day Celtic lands of Wales, Scotland, Cornwall, Brittany, and Ireland. The savagery of this period must also be assumed though archaeology has, as yet, failed to produce evidence of mass graves to imply many major pitched battles or genocide. There clearly was some British resistance to these incursions (it is in this period, for example, that the legendary name of Arthur first appears as a leader combating the invaders), but this seems more akin to a lengthy rearguard action, especially successful in delaying the Saxon advance into Cornwall.

Overall, though, the 'migration period' poses many questions, which may never be answered. Most crucially, as one scholar suggests, we are completely unclear as to whether this was 'a huge influx of settlers over the sea from the east' or 'a total cultural and ethnic shift whereby the descendants of the Roman-period native population became English' (Hines, 2004, p. 39).

As the invading tribes battled the indigenous population and fought among themselves, larger kingdoms began to form, so that by

² Archaeological evidence at places such as Feddersen Wierde in Northern Germany indicates that settlements around that time were abandoned.

the 7th century the famous Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy emerged. This consisted of seven major kingdoms: Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex, and Wessex. War between the kingdoms was clearly common, with power bases shifting back and forth; but this was all to change in the 8th century when the first Viking invasions began. The increasing attacks of the Vikings brought many of the kingdoms to their knees and led to a wave of migration from Scandinavia and the subsequent settlement of areas of England by these new invaders (mainly in the north of England). So much so that by the end of the 9th century only the kingdom of Wessex, under King Alfred 'the Great' (871–99),³ remained independent. After a series of near catastrophic setbacks Alfred 'defeated' the Vikings and began the refortification, re-education, and rebuilding of Wessex. Once the truce he had signed was broken (in which Alfred had ceded northern England to Viking control – the so-called 'Danelaw'), the king began the reconquest of England, gradually pushing northwards. This was continued by his sons and grandsons so successfully that by the mid-10th century all of England had been reclaimed and came under the single rule of King Athelstan of Wessex (924–39), who properly deserves the title of the first King of England.

With this reconquest came a sense of national unity, and the notion of the *Angelcynn* ('race of the English') as used by Alfred, and *Engla lond* ('England' – a term which came into existence by 1000). Interestingly both were named after the Angles (the race that settled Mercia, Northumbria, and East Anglia) but accepted and adopted by the Saxons. Yet this unity would always be tested, and the rise of the power of the Church at the expense of the nobility (thus leading to a lack of loyalty on the latter's part), coupled with the now permanent Danish population in the north, weakened national security. This was most evident under the reign of Æthelred the Unready (979–1016), where renewed Viking invasions (more organised and disciplined this time) brought England to defeat, so much so that by 1016 the throne was handed to the Viking king, Cnut (1016–35), becoming part of his wider Scandinavian empire. Although the English regained the throne under Edward the Confessor (1042–66), Anglo-Saxon rule ended in 1066 in a flurry of political intrigue over the right of succession. The successful claim to the throne by William the Conqueror, backed with military might and papal approval, brought the Normans to power after the defeat of Harold at Hastings.

³ Dates for kings refer to the time they ruled, not their lifespan. Alfred was in fact born in 849.

4 Introductory Key Concepts

In summary then, the history of Anglo-Saxon England is a complicated story. Yet it is important to take away some key observations:

- the Anglo-Saxons started to migrate to an already occupied Britain in the mid-5th century from the area we now term northern Germany and Denmark;
- according to Bede (see Chapter 2(a) and (d)) they consisted of three tribes – the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes – but we know that other races were also represented;
- it is assumed that originally they continued their warrior tribe structure, but gradually these tribes formed into larger kingdoms, eventually becoming the famous seven kingdoms or Heptarchy;
- Viking attacks in the 8th and 9th centuries nearly destroyed Anglo-Saxon rule, but under Alfred the Great the reconquest began and England was unified in the 10th century under Athelstan;
- Anglo-Saxon rule finally came to an end with the Norman Conquest in 1066.

See also Chapter 1(e), Chapter 2(d), (e), (g), and Chapter 4(k).

Further Reading

Throughout this book we refer to many monographs and series that will reinforce the study of Old English from a literary, linguistic, and historical perspective. For a gentle introduction to the events of the period we recommend Blair (2000), John (1996), the Short Oxford Histories of the British Isles (Charles-Edwards, 2003, and Davies, 2003), and Campbell et al. (1991). If you are interested in the cartography and geographical development of Anglo-Saxon England then see Hill (1981). For more information on Anglo-Saxon society, see Chapter 1(b), (e), (f), and (d).

(b) Anglo-Saxon Society

The legacy of the Anglo-Saxon period (outlined in Chapter 1(a)) was remarkable. Not only did the English language rise to a dominant position as the language of court, and to a certain degree the church, but the boundaries of England as a country and its administrative system were also set. We will touch on these issues many times in this book, but for now it is worth capturing a few of the general points.

The period began with the migration of tribes from mainland