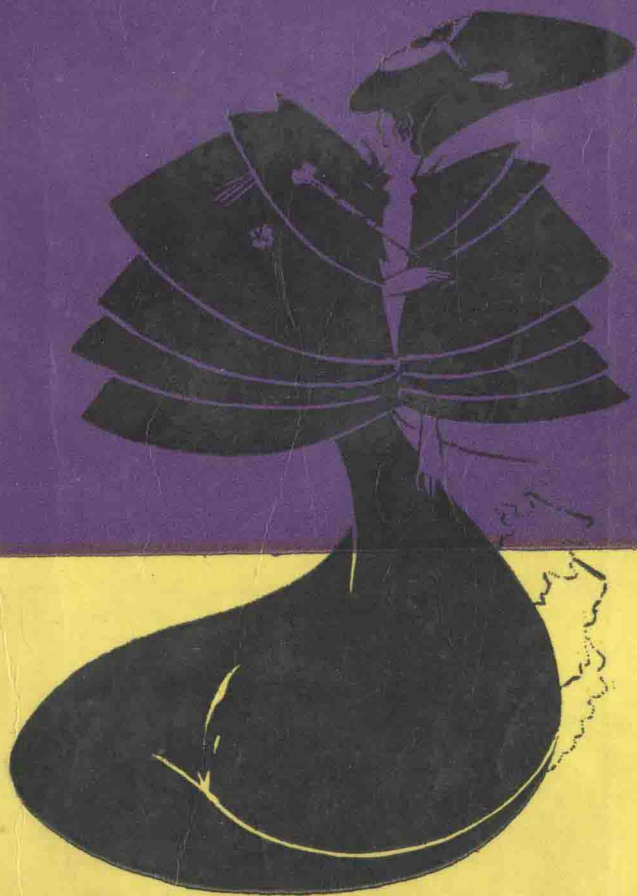


A COURSE IN
ENGLISH LITERATURE

英國文學教程

胡蔭桐 主編



英国文学教程

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胡荫桐 主编

赵学军 刘树森 宋国柱 编

南开大学出版社

〔津〕新登字(90)011号

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南开大学出版社出版
(天津八里台南开大学校内)
邮政编码 300071 电话 349318
新华书店天津发行所发行
河北昌黎县印刷厂印刷

1992年11月第1版 1992年12月第1次印刷
开本:850×1168 1/32 印张:16.25 插页:2
字数:486千 印数:1—5000
ISBN7-310-00494-9/I·39 定价:9.40元

PREFACE

This book is the end product of conception, overall design, unremitting efforts and practice in teaching which took, from start to finish, over six years. In accordance with the teaching programme issued by the State Commission for Education, we integrated the history of English literature and the selected readings organically so as to (1) help students to appreciate and analyze as much as possible representative works of the important writers from the various periods of English literature, and (2) help them to form a deep and comprehensive understanding of that literature. This was done after a conscientious study of the characteristics of Chinese students in learning English literature and a careful study of relevant textbooks used in British and American universities. In the book, every effort has been made to attain a concise, distinct account of literary history, and to attain wide representation of the selected literary works, which must be in the original, and cover the most possible modern and contemporary literary works. Although the narrative of literary history in the book begins from the Middle Ages, the literary selections begin with the writers of the English Renaissance rather than from Geoffrey Chaucer, whose works in university textbooks are translations of the original because of the difficulty in reading Middle English. We strove for specific and exhaustive annotations of the selected works so as to extend help to students for an initiative study, and tried to inspire them to look for the main points and central idea of a work by appending "Questions to Study" to it. Aside from being used as a textbook of English literature for the English speciality of the university, this book may benefit the broad masses of English learners considerably in their advanced studies.

We are indebted to Dr. Judith Stelboum and Dr. Teresa O'Connor, two directors of the Chinese American Educational Exchange, for their substantive assistance and helpful sugges-

tions about content and form. We feel deeply our obligation to Prof. George J. Love, who read part of the manuscript and advanced valuable suggestions about style and structure. And finally we wish to praise Ms. BAI Li, editor in charge, who afforded us concrete assistance so that this book could be published in time.

HU Yirtong

December 29th, 1991

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CHAPTER I

THE MIDDLE AGES

ORIGIN OF THE ENGLISH NATION

Many centuries ago, the Celts were taken as the earliest natives, who were later also called the Britons. They actually knew nothing of a written language. Since the Celts had been related with the ancient people in what is now France when Britain used to be part of the European Continent a long time ago and before it was later washed off by sea water and became an island, they, perhaps, offered some help to resist Julius Caesar when he invaded France.

THE ROMAN CONQUEST

The Romans led by Julius Caesar, went across the English Channel in 55 B. C. , but this expedition did not result in any permanent settlement. Nearly a century elapsed before the Roman emperor Claudius led a campaign which established the Roman rule in Britain (43 A. D.). The Romans brought their Roman civilization. They brought to Britain a knowledge of iron; they introduced Roman law. Judges in wigs could be seen in Great Britain and its colonies. They built some highways, called "streets" and also built towns, temples, theatres and fine buildings. They taught the Britons to cultivate their land in a better way. The Roman occupation lasted for about four hundred years, and in 410 A. D. when the Germanic races were attacking Rome, all the Roman troops were withdrawn.

THE ENGLISH CONQUEST

When, in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Huns came pour-

ing into Europe, all the Germanic tribes of Central and Northern Europe felt the pressure, among them the Angles and the Saxons and the Jutes, from whom the English were to be formed. They drove the Britons west and north, and settled down themselves. The Jutes occupied Kent, in the southeastern corner; the Saxons took the southern part and Wessex, Essex and Sussex; the Angles spread over the east midland—East Angles. And the three dialects spoken by them naturally grew into a single language called Anglo-Saxon, which is now called Old English.

The history of the period from about 600 to 850 is chiefly the story of the rise and fall of petty kingdoms. The Anglo-Saxons were Christianized in the seventh century. Then monasteries were built all over the country. Only monks could read and write, the earliest English books were written down.

THE OLD ENGLISH LANGUAGE

English is a member of the Anglo-Frisian branch of the West Germanic languages. As a member of the Germanic language-group, English is part of the Indo-European family of languages.

In the period before the Norman Conquest, and for a generation or so thereafter, English was highly inflected, and it had not made use, as yet, of its amazing power of borrowing and assimilating foreign words—one of the striking features of Modern English. Its vocabulary was conservative; its grammar complex; its dialectal differences many. During this Old English period (before 1100) we can recognize four major dialects; the Northumbrian, the Mercian, the West Saxon, and the Kentish. Of these four, Northumbrian and Mercian represent the old dialect of Anglia; West Saxon that of Wessex; and the Kentish, that of Kent and the original settlement of the Jutes.

Since nearly all the important works of Old English literature are written in the dialect of Wessex (West Saxon), it is impossible to read this Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, as it is sometimes called, without special training. Consequently all selections from Old English literature have been translated into Modern

English. Since the sound of the Old English language is different from that of Modern English, the vocabulary frequently obsolete, and the metrical device of the poetry ill-adapted, all translations of poetry have been rendered in Modern English prose. No attempt, therefore, has been made to make these translations absolutely literal, or to preserve the alliterative principle (although instances of alliteration may occur).

The presence of a full inflectional system, it might be added, is a definite distinctive mark of Old English. The inflectional ending began to weaken and even to disappear during the eleventh century. There is, therefore, a linguistic reason for the division of English literature into Old, Middle, and Modern; the Old English (500-1100) being the period of full inflections; the Middle English (1100-1500), the period of weakening and disappearing inflectional endings; the Modern English (1500 to the present), the period of loss of inflections.

THE LITERATURE OF THE OLD ENGLISH PERIOD

In the course of the English Conquest, the subjugation of Britons had been complete and violent; those who escaped slavery or the sword had fled into the western regions of Wales and Cornwall, or across the sea into Ireland or into the north country (beyond the Firth of Forth). The field was left to the Anglo-Saxon warrior, who, now that he had more territory in which to live, was inclined to settle down and enjoy it. Before the tenth century, the warrior had been the most important of human beings. It was to him that the generations turned for the solution of all their problems. The type of kingdom which the Anglo-Saxon set up in England, when he first arrived, was the same as the type the Germanic warrior had known on the Continent. The tilling of the soil, hunting and fishing and fowling, metal-working, forging, and weaving remained the occupation of the yeoman, who was bound to the service of an earl or the warrior. Even less important in the social and political scene were women, who were valuable only for domestic duties, or as marriageable commodities. For fighting, by which the destinies of tribes were decided, was

very much the business of the warrior. It was a man's world indeed; a warrior's code of pride, loyalty, and courage was imposed directly upon the tribe.

THE WARRIOR'S CONTRIBUTION TO LITERATURE

The epics are the earliest pieces of literature surviving from the Old English period and indeed a tribute to the vitality of the ancient paganism. The so-called "epic tradition"—the composing in verse of tribal or national legends about a great hero, always a fighting warrior—was then considered worthy of preservation. The beginning of English literature is to be found in the Heroic Age of the Anglo-Saxons, while they were still on the Continent. In any case, the personality and the deeds of a hero were a source of inspiration to members of the tribe. Sometimes the hero and the king were the same man—in fact, the throne was a common reward for heroship. But royal birth was not an absolute essential; an even better qualification for the hero was a somewhat mysterious half-supernatural origin.

To celebrate the deeds of the hero, and thereby to perpetuate his name and his glory unto succeeding generations, was the business of the bard, or minstrel, whom the Anglo-Saxons called the scop. The Old English lyric, then, is the direct gift of the fighting warrior and his scop. It is apparent that the bard (scop) could use a lyric vein as well as an epic theme when he so desired, as a piece like *Deor's Lament*. The scop had developed a technique of the heroic epic. The scop's story was intended for the king or his warriors—the subject-matter was made to suit an aristocratic audience. How many of these epics were composed during the Heroic Age of the Anglo-Saxon can not be told; none of them were written down for centuries; instead they were passed by word of mouth from scop to scop; and the stories grew in the passing.

There is but one full-length heroic epic surviving in Old English; *Beowulf*.

Beowulf

Beowulf, the only complete epic of 3,182 lines and the liter-

ature of the warrior preserved in Old English survives in only one manuscript, now lying in the British Museum. The manuscript was written in Wessex about the year 1000, but the poem itself was probably composed in Northumbria some time during the first half of the eighth century. The historical event described in the poem belongs to the early sixth century—Hygelac's raid on the Frisians occurred.

At the beginning of the poem are eulogized the heroic deeds of a Danish king and his descendants, one of whom, Hrothgar, builds a great hall called Heorot. One night the monster Grendel enters the hall, and takes away thirty thanes of Hrothgar's. In the following twelve years, the monster continues threatening the Danish king and his men with death until Beowulf, the nephew of the king of the Geats living in the south of Sweden, together with fourteen companions comes across the sea to help. Beowulf and his warriors sleep in the hall, when Grendel breaks in and devours one man. Beowulf, bare-handed, wrestles with the monster and tears off one of his arms. The monster Grendel was mortally wounded and flees to his lair. For this success Beowulf is bountifully rewarded by Hrothgar. Grendel's mother, a water-hag, comes to revenge and carries off the counsellor of Hrothgar. Beowulf dives into a pond and reaches the witch's lair. He begins fighting with her, but the sword which he borrows from Unferth who is jealous of his prowess fails to kill her. When Beowulf is in great danger, God saves him. He found an old sword among the armour in the cave, with which he cuts the witch's head and Grendel's head off. Hrothgar praises him and warns him against pride. Beowulf and his companions return to the land of his uncle, king of the Geats, and is offered one part of the kingdom as well as much money as a reward. Later Beowulf succeeds to the throne and reigns the kingdom for fifty years.

A dragon comes to revenge itself on the country for the lost treasure which it used to guard. Beowulf calls together eleven warriors to meet the dragon breathing out fire. During the fierce battle, Beowulf's sword gets broken, and the dragon grips Beowulf's neck with its teeth. At this critical moment, Wiglaf, while all other warriors fly to a wood, wounds the dragon and

Beowulf kills it though he is mortally wounded. At the end of the poem, Beowulf dies courageously.

The historical events the poem involves may possibly happen in the first part of the sixth century. Though we can know many characters in the poem from other sources, no final conclusion has yet been reached on the time of the composition of *Beowulf*, for both Christian influence and heathen customs can be found in the poem. The figure of Beowulf has dignity and polish, in the sense that he is fully acquainted with the etiquette demanded of a chieftain of his importance. His physical equipment is nothing short of overwhelming; it is chiefly in his swimming and gripping prowess. These physical attributes, then, are Beowulf's peculiar contribution to the epic tradition of great strength.

Beowulf is a poem well fitted to stand as the chief monument of Old English literature. Its most obvious flaw is its laxity of structure. The epic remains as three or four stories about Beowulf rather than one, a frequent enough phenomenon among early heroic epics. Yet in a sense the poem has unity, since the character of the hero, summarized in the last sentence of the poem, is the one to which all parts of the poem are joined. And in its richness of language, its swift narration, its suggestive qualities, its interest in what men think and feel as well as in what they do, and above all in its pictures of brave men struggling against outward foes and inward dreads, and conquering if only in death, *Beowulf* has genuine qualities of greatness. And the historical significance of *Beowulf* lies in reflecting the features of the tribal society of ancient times.

THE PRIEST'S CONTRIBUTION TO LITERATURE

The pagan warrior gave to Old English literature the heroic epic, the elegiac lyric, and the poetic form for both these types. The scop was his accredited mouth-piece. The warrior and his scop, however, knew nothing of the world beyond the confines of their narrow little township or county. It was the priest who brought the seeds of Christianity, which had been sown in the islands of Britain during the later years of the Roman occupation.

The coming of the priests meant a new religion in England, which was wholly opposed to the religion of the Germanic peoples. Moreover, Christianity brought a knowledge of Latin, possibly even of Greek. Since the priests were the only people of the time who could read and write, naturally all recorded Old English literature dates from Christian times in England.

A heroic epic like *Beowulf*, for example, would be touched by the hand of the priest. *Beowulf*, an epic composed orally as early as the seventh or eighth century, perhaps much earlier, is finally put in manuscript about the year 1000. Christian influence and heathen customs can be found in the poem. Assuming a single author, we still know nothing about him except by inference. The Christian atmosphere in the poem would indicate that he was a churchman, but one closely connected with a royal court, familiar with the heroic legends of his race, and expert in the composition of alliterative poetry. Like many epic poets, he was an admirer of the good old times and good old ways; his purpose was to emphasize the established ideals of social and personal conduct by embodying them in the figure of a hero whom his audience could strive to emulate.

The two poets of the Old English period who have identities—Caedmon and Cynewulf—however shadowy those identities may be, are Christian Anglo-Saxons, writing in a Christian monastic environment.

The priest was naturally a teacher, and to teach prose. Most of this prose of the Old English period is in Latin. Bede and Alfred the Great, two important figures were also the presiding geniuses in Old English prose.

BEDE (673-735)

The outward life of Bede was uneventful and placid. Born in 673 near what is now Durham, he was early an orphan and came into the care of Benedict, a Northumbrian nobleman turned monk, who was one of the most enlightened men of a not unenlightened environment. Benedict was a great builder of churches and monasteries, constructed them according to the best continental

methods. Among his accomplishments were a knowledge of Latin and perhaps of Greek, and a love of books, which resulted in an unusually large library he accumulated. Under the influence of such a man, Bede expanded graciously. He entered Benedict's first monastery at Wearmouth; and when, in 682, the neighbouring monastery at Jarrow was completed, Bede moved there, never to leave. Jarrow, its library and scriptures, became his world, and a world well suited to his temperament.

Bede performed quietly and diligently all the duties pre-scribed for him. He mastered all the learning then including the Latin classics, history, mathematics, etc.

His writings, about forty, all in Latin, are for the most part commentaries on *the Bible*. Bede's main theme is the spread of Christianity and the growth of English Church. His masterpiece, *the Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, originally written in Latin, reviews the early English life such as the English conquest and settlements, the English christianization and its cultural influence and the most quoted part—Caedmon's Hymn and the source of poetic inspiration. Bede tells how Caedmon, an illiterate cowherd employed by the Monastery of Whitby, turned into an important religious poet overnight under the God's encouragement and his own inspiration. The *History* was of such great importance in the eyes of Alfred the Great that he became responsible for its translation into the vernacular of 900.

ALFRED (849—901)

The outstanding figure in the history of Old English prose is the valiant Alfred, King of Wessex, on whom sometimes the adjective "Great" is put as Alfred the Great. An inspiring leader of his people at a most difficult period in their history, he was considered a ruler with true concern for the education and enlightenment of all the subjects in England before the Norman Conquest.

He was born in 849, when acute were the wars between the West Saxons and the Viking Danes, whose presence had been a menace to Mercia during the preceding half-century, and who were now threatening the existence of Wessex. The struggle be-