

Chapter One

Old English Literature

1.1 Historical Background

In the middle of the fifth century, several Germanic tribes invaded the British Isles inhabited by the Celts and established permanent settlements there. They brought with them there a language, a religion, and a poetic tradition. In time, their culture was transformed by natural processes from inside and by invasions and other influences from outside, the most important single force being the conversion of the island to Christianity.

The invaders consisted of three Germanic tribes—the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes. The origins of the three are clouded in obscurity and controversy, and it is said that distinctions between Angles and Saxons had been blurred even before their migration to England. The term “Anglo-Saxon” originally differentiated the English from the continental Saxons, but it came to include all the Germanic invaders, possibly because of the overwhelming prominence of the Saxons. Yet, surprisingly enough, “England” and “English” are derived from the word “Angle”. At any rate, by the end of the sixth century the Jutes occupied Kent (in the southeast); the Saxons held Sussex and Wessex (in the south); the Angles settled in East Anglia (north of Kent), Mercia (in central England) and Northumbria (in the north, bordering on Scotland). Tribal affiliations soon gave way to somewhat loose political units, small kingdoms based upon new geographic ties.

The social unit of the Germanic tribes was the family or clan. Each member bore responsibility for any wrongs inflicted or suffered by his kinsmen; included among his duties was the obligation to execute revenge or to arrive at a peaceful settlement through the payment of a predetermined value in money or property. A youth would attach himself to a strong leader. In exchange for economic and legal protection, the young man offered military service. The chief fought for victory, and the followers fought for their chief. If the young man retreated from the field after his leader had been killed, he would suffer reproach and infamy for the rest of his life. This kind of social culture can be seen in *Beowulf* and in other Old English poems.



1.2 The Development of the English Language

English, like other languages, has continually changed and continues to change in response to fresh influences. New habits slowly develop among those who use the language, and drastic modifications take place as a result of contact with foreign cultures through trade, migration, and war. Sometimes a new field of learning catapults into public recognition—nuclear physics or rocket science, for instance—with the eventual result that portions of a highly specialized vocabulary filter down into popular usage.

The present-day English language is the product of several thousand years of such evolution. English is a member of a large and ancient family of languages—the Indo-European Family of Languages, and it falls into three major periods: Old English or “Anglo-Saxon” (449–1066), Middle English (1066–1485), and Modern English (1485 to the present day). Old English differs from Modern English in spelling, pronunciation, and grammar. Yet the most formidable difference between Old English and Modern English is in vocabulary. Old English was essentially unilingual: Instead of borrowing from other languages, it formed new words out of its own native resources. Modern English was enriched by foreign importations, especially French. Yet it proceeded to evolve largely from London English.

1.3 Literary Features

Behind the literary products of the Anglo-Saxons, especially the poetry, lays a long oral tradition which developed during the time when the Germanic tribes still inhabited the European continent. Early Germanic poetry was composed and recited by the scop, a professional bard who might have often wandered from court to court hoping to acquire the patronage of some generous lords. At court feasts, the scop would celebrate the deeds of real or legendary heroes out of the remote past with songs.

But with the conversion of England to Christianity, the subject matter of poetry underwent a crucial change. Poetry and prose were committed to religious writing, and, with the Church virtually monopolizing the art of copying old works and creating new ones, the clerics generally preserved only such material as was considered serviceable to Christianity. The Old English poets either used Christian material from Scripture or the liturgy, or they tried, with varying degrees of success, to get subjects of pagan derivation into the framework of the

Christian universe. Beowulf could be comprehended as an ideal Christian king who had not been entirely divested of the thirst for worldly glory that motivated the Germanic warriors.

The verse patterns utilized by Old English poets also represented an accumulation of centuries of oral tradition. The poetic line, which was really two half-lines separated by a distinct pause, contained four accented syllables and a varying number of unaccented syllables. It was once thought that each of the four stressed syllables was accompanied by chords struck by the scop on a small harp.

Old English poets rarely used end rhyme, but they regularly used a system of alliteration. This alliteration involved the initial sounds, whether vowels or consonants, of the four stressed syllables. As a rule, three of the stressed syllables were alliterated, and it was the initial sound of the third accented syllable that normally determined the alliteration.

Rhythm and alliteration were not the only poetic devices. In order to achieve variety, as well as to suggest important attributes of his subject, the scop would frequently introduce a kind of metaphor called the “kenning”, a compound of two terms used in place of a common word. The sun, for example, could be referred to as “world candle”; the prince as “ring giver”; the ocean as “sea-monster’s home” or “gannet’s bath”. The “kenning” in the hands of a talented poet could provide a fresh appeal to the imagination of the audience.

Many of the earliest works written by English churchmen were in Latin. And throughout the Old English period, as well as during the Middle Ages and thereafter, a number of English writers—John Milton, to cite a distinguished example—continued to produce sizable quantities of Latin verse and prose. Anglo-Latin literature in the Old English period was often didactic, with its principal functions being to provide religious instruction or inspiration, but Anglo-Latin literature boasts a few writings which combine charm with piety and still others which can almost be called secular. Judged merely as literature, the Latin writings of the Anglo-Saxons may not rank high. But as a measure of the level of culture achieved and sustained in Anglo-Saxon England, they are extremely valuable.

1.4 Representative Writers and Works

A tremendous amount of Old English literature has perished, and much of that which has survived is in a fragmentary form. Among the most substantial surviving Old English



poems is *Beowulf*, which will be dealt with later.

The prose division of Anglo-Saxon literature is of less literary interest than the verse. But it is more abundant in quantity. The man most responsible for the development of literary prose during the Old English period is Alfred the Great (849–899), who, as part of his systematic efforts to make Wessex a center of English culture, translated into English certain important Latin texts, among which is Bede's *History*. King Alfred's representative work is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the most important monument of Anglo-Saxon prose, carrying us to contemporary vernacular history from the middle of the eighth century to the middle of the twelfth century, preserving amid drier annals some exceedingly interesting fragments of composition of the more original kind both in prose and verse, manifesting an ability to manage the subject that was only much later shown in other vernacular languages, and bridging for us the gulf between the ruin of Anglo-Saxon even before the Conquest and the rise of English properly more than a century subsequent to it.

The outstanding representative of Anglo-Latin culture was Bede (673–735). In his monastery at Jarrow, Northumbria, Bede encompassed many areas of intellectual accomplishments. He wrote Latin treatises on medicine, astronomy, mathematics and philosophy. He was also a biographer. His immortal achievement, however, was in the field of history. Bede's monumental *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical Histories of the English People*) traces the history of England from Caesar's invasion, in 55 B.C., to 731, the year in which the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* was completed. The first writer to conceive of the English as one people with a single destiny, Bede would have his readers become more familiar with the actions and sayings of former men of renown. To make his narrative still more attractive, he introduced anecdotes, dramatic speeches, and miracles—all designed to show the Christian ideal as the most compelling force in the universe.

1.5 *Beowulf* and the Heroic Epic Tradition

Sometime between the year 700 and 900, the first great English epic poem *Beowulf* was composed. It tells the song of Beowulf, a warrior prince from Geatland in Sweden, who goes to Denmark and kills the monster Grendel that has been attacking the great Hall of Heorot, built by Hrothgar, the Danish King. Grendel's mother, a water monster, takes revenge by

carrying off one of the King's noblemen, but Beowulf dives into the underwater lair in which she lives and kills her, too. Returning home, in due course, Beowulf becomes the King of the Geats. The poem then moves forward about fifty years. Beowulf's kingdom is ravaged by a fire-breathing dragon that burns the royal hall. Beowulf, aided by a young warrior, Wiglaf, manages to kill the dragon, but is fatally wounded in the course of the fight. He pronounces Wiglaf his successor. The poem ends with Beowulf's burial and a premonition that the kingdom will be overthrown.

Structurally, *Beowulf* is built around three fights. Each of these involves a battle between those who live in the royal hall and a monster; the monsters are dangerous, unpredictable, and incomprehensible forces that threaten the security and well-being of those in power and the way of life they represent. This is a pattern that is specific to the Anglo-Saxon period, but which also echoes down through the whole history of English literature. Time and time again, literary texts deal with an idea of order. There is a sense of a well-run state or a settled social order, and, for the individual a feeling of existing within a secure framework. In *Beowulf*, a sense of security is linked with the presence of the great hall as a place of refuge and shared values; it is a place for feasting and celebrations, providing warmth and protection against whatever might be encountered in the darkness outside. Over and over again, however, literary texts focus on threats to such a feeling of security and confidence. There might be an external threat, such as a monster or a foreign enemy, or an enemy within, such as the rebellious noblemen in Shakespeare's history plays who challenge the authority of the King. The Anglo-Saxon period is essentially a warrior society, a tribal community with people clustering together in forts and settlements, fearing attack. The land is farmed, and there are centers of learning, but the overwhelming fact of life is invasion by outside forces. *Beowulf* reflects and expresses the anxieties that would have dominated such a society.

Beowulf belongs to a tradition of heroic or epic poetry. This tradition can, indirectly, be traced back to Ancient Greece and Rome. An epic is a long narrative poem (there are 3,182 lines in *Beowulf*) that operates on a grand scale and deals with the deeds of warriors and heroes. As is the case in *Beowulf*, while focusing on the deeds of one man, epic poems also interlace the main narrative with myths, legends, folk tales, and past events; there is a composite effect, the entire culture of a country cohering in the overall experience of the poem. *Beowulf* belongs to the category of oral, as opposed to literary, epic, in that it was

composed to be recited; it was only written down much later as the poem that exists today, possibly as late as the year 1000.

In epic poetry there are always threats and dangers that have to be confronted, but even more important is the sense of a hero who embodies the qualities that are necessary in a leader in a hierarchical, masculine, warrior society; the text is concerned with the qualities that constitute his greatness, the poem as a whole amounting to what we might regard as a debate about the nature of the society and its values. Central to those values is the idea of loyalty to one's lord: The lord provides food and protection in return for service. He is the "giver of rings" and rewards, and the worst of crime is betrayal. This impression of a larger purpose in *Beowulf* is underlined by the inclusion of decorous speeches and passages of moral reflection, and by the inclusion of quasi-historical stories of feuds and wars that echo and support the main narrative. The fact that *Beowulf* exists within a literary tradition is also apparent in its use of the alliterative meter, which is the most notable feature of Germanic prosody; in *Beowulf*, as in Old English verse generally, there are two or three alliterating stressed syllables in each line, reflecting the pattern of speech and so appropriate for oral performance. The effect is to link the two halves of the lines into rich interweaving pattern of vocabulary idea. The convention may seem strange to modern readers, but in its distinctive way it serves, like rhyme, to reinforce the poem's theme of the search for order in a chaotic world. Observe the following sample describing the monster Grendel's approach to the Danish hall:

From the stretching moors, from the misty hollows,
Grendel came creeping, cursed of God,
A murderous ravager minded to snare
Spoil of heroes in high-built hall.
Under clouded heaven she held his way
Till there rose before him the high-roofed house
Wine-hall of warriors gleaming with gold.

(*Beowulf*)

The pounding rhythm, in conjunction with the alliteration, conveys an impression of unrelenting strength.

Chapter Two

Middle English Literature (1066–1510)

2.1 Historical Background

The Middle English period, an age which in time produced Chaucer and witnessed the birth of modern drama, began in 1066, the year of the Norman Conquest. The Normans, originally a band of Scandinavian pirates, conquered England and brought it into the orbit of French culture. Under the leadership of William, Duke of Normandy, the Norman invaders proceeded to reshape the destiny of England. Anglo-Saxon political institutions were overhauled by Norman administrators; the English language was remolded through contact with French; society at large underwent great changes, often reflected in the literature of the period.

After the Norman victory at the Battle of Hastings, William I was crowned King William I of England. The new monarch systematically embarked upon an economic and social reorganization of the conquered country. He rewarded his Norman followers with the lands of the defeated English nobility and thereby introduced feudalism into England. On the relationship between the ecclesiastical and secular arms of the government, the King had definite views. Although he cooperated with the Pope in seeking monastic reform and drew England generally closer to Rome, he insisted upon a separation of the secular from the ecclesiastical courts and firmly upheld the independent authority of the former. The King, William maintained, should hold the highest position and make the major appointments. William managed to exercise personal control over the affairs of state, and even when he delegated powers to his justifiers (political and judicial officers appointed by the King), he kept himself fully informed as to what was going on throughout England.

The Norman Empire, which was built by William I and his immediate successors, began to decline near the end of the twelfth century. In 1204, the ineffectual King John lost Normandy to France (an event of special significance for the history of the English language), and in 1215 his domestic powers in England were seriously challenged by the rebellious barons. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were marked by the exhausting



Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) between England and France; England not only lost the war, but was torn by civil strife, particularly the Wars of the Roses (1455–1485) between the rival houses of Lancaster and York. At last, however, at the battle of Bosworth (1485), the Wars of the Roses came to a military end. The Duke of Richmond gained the English throne and, reigning as Henry VII, ushered in the era of the Tudors. With this event, the Middle English period may be said to have ended.

Although the political implications of the Norman Conquest were of exceptional importance, the most significant effect of the conquest consisted in the impact it had upon the structure and future growth of the English language. The conquest led in time to an expansion of the literary potentialities of English beyond anything the language had previously known.

After the cultural leadership of Alfred's Wessex receded in the face of almost constant social and military pressures, English and French began a long struggle for linguistic supremacy. Naturally enough, the masses, who had been born in England, continued to speak English, while the new nobility, which had its roots in France, read and wrote in French. English was the language of day-by-day utilitarian discourse; French was the language of belles-lettres (intellectuals). But the loss of Normandy to France weakened the allegiance of the Anglo-Norman lords to the continent and gave a fresh stimulus to English nationalism. By about 1250, English had begun to supplant French, and to a large extent Latin, in nearly all areas. The displacement of French was further accelerated by the wave of patriotism that accompanied the Hundred Years' War. By the end of the fourteenth century, a literature had been created in English that surpassed what was produced in French. After about 1450, a "standard" English emerged from the welter of local Middle English dialects.

Spelling, pronunciation, and grammar changed strikingly between Old English and Middle English, which can be seen in a page of the Old English *Beowulf* in the original, and a page of the Middle English *The Canterbury Tales*. Some of the changes were in the direction of simplicity—for example, the substantial loss of inflections. Others complicated the language, as in the frequently revolutionary spelling conventions introduced by the Anglo-Norman scribes. But the most prominent feature of Middle English was its new and enlarged vocabulary. Besides additional prefixes and suffixes, more than ten thousand French words found their way into the English language.

2.2 Literary Features

The Christian view of the universe permeates the most enduring literature of the Middle English period. The bulk of the extant literature of the Middle English period is concerned, explicitly or implicitly, with the problem of sin and redemption. One insistent theme recurs: the vanity and treachery of transitory world as opposed to the perfect bliss of the world to come. Death is seen not as an affliction, but rather as the culmination of a long journey—the release from all the shortcomings attendant upon man in his mortal state and the deliverance into eternal joys. God himself was absolute perfection. His greatness was manifest throughout His great universe. Consequently, some authors, for figurative purposes, chose to speak of the world as symbol. By the visible forms and motions of everyday life could be expressed intangible spiritual mysteries. The red rose, for example, was a convenient figure for the blood of the martyrs; the twelve months could be used to represent the apostles. This kind of symbolizing can be readily seen in the Middle English *Pearl*, *Piers Plowman*, *Everyman*, and, to a certain extent, *The Canterbury Tales*. In Dante's *The Divine Comedy* (1307–1317), the most sublime poem of the Middle Ages, the poet's journey from the forest of Error through Inferno (Hell), Purgatorio (Purgatory), and Paradiso (Paradise) stands symbolically for the gradual ascent of mankind to the divine presence and the seat of grace.

Medieval literature is also frequently concerned with clarifying the duties of each member in the hierarchal feudal society. The feudal king had the commanding position and expected complete allegiance and devotion from his subjects. He rewarded his followers with the lands of displaced English nobles, but these lands remained in his jurisdiction. The lords and their descendants held the estates in perpetuity so long as they furnished the king with knights, young men who were trained to fight on horseback, for his military campaigns. The lords would meet their military commitments by similarly subinfeudating, or subleasing, part of their estates to lesser nobles in return for military service. This vassalage continued down the social scale. The serfs were obligated to provide physical labour on the manor of their immediate lord in exchange for food and protections on which they lived. Each member of hierarchy, from king to serfs, thus had definite responsibilities.

Medieval literature constantly stressed the doctrine of chivalry and courtly love. Chivalry was the elegant ideal of knighthood, initially a practical means of supplying cavalrymen for the king's wars. But soon it was not enough for the true knight to be merely



a capable horseman. He was expected, like the knight in *The Canterbury Tales*, to exemplify courage, piety, generosity, and above all, courtesy. In theory, chivalry was identified with virtue; later, with increasing emphasis placed upon the protection of the weak, the chivalric ideal became as compelling in peace as in war. One development conventionally associated with chivalry is the highly controversial doctrine known as courtly love. According to the rules of courtly love, true love is impossible between husband and wife, but under no circumstance is marriage to be considered an exercise for not loving. The courtly lover is required to worship at the shine of a beautiful lady, generally the wife of somebody else. After being singled out for the favours of his mistress, he must swoon, send her the appropriate gifts, and obey her every whim. Moreover, he risks anything—even his life—to defend her reputation. The passion is, by definition, adulterous, and secretly becomes imperative in the relationship; medieval romance abounds in references to “derne (secret) love”, a phrase Chaucer frequently makes fun of. At one point, courtly love seems to be partially reconciled with the chivalric ideal. This kinship appears that the courtly lover is never promiscuous. He remains faithful to his one lady; she, in turn, inspires him to perform acts of courtesy on behalf of all womanhood.

Though medieval literature has some specific religious, political, and social-aesthetic ideals as mentioned above, the reader approaching it for the first time will be most impressed by its enormous diversity. There are about sixteen major literary types in the Middle English period. There is also considerable metrical variety in it. Old English verse was almost without exception unrhymed, nonstanzaic, and alliterative; Middle English poets, on the other hand, frequently utilized complicated rhyme schemes and stanza forms. Although writers, especially in the North, did not altogether abandon Old English literary conventions, they nevertheless imported French genres and prosody, and they often tried to imitate the elegance of polite French literature. Chaucer, for one period, absorbed many lessons from his study and imitation of French and Italian poetic masters. The Middle English period was one of experiment and discovery in literature.

The following is a list of the dominant types and verse forms employed by Middle English writers:

Allegory: the more or less extended use of metaphor, symbol, or personification for the purpose of communicating indirectly a hidden meaning—often a veiled personal identity,