

Introducing the Literature of the Middle Ages

The Middle Ages refers to the period between 500-1500 AD. These dates correspond roughly with the fall of the Roman Empire (the end of the Classical period) and the Renaissance, or the early modern period. The thousand years in between were referred to by Italian thinkers of the Renaissance as the Middle Ages, or *medio evo*, from which we get our adjective form “medieval”. The study of the literature of the Middle Ages is thus the study of medieval literature.

Since this handout is written for students taking course in an English Department, it is implicitly a course taught about literature produced in the British Isles, since English speakers had not colonised regions outside Britain and Ireland before 1500. The use of the term “British” to describe the more complete literary tradition raises a terminological difficulty that is almost as old as the Middle Ages itself. “British” and “English” are not interchangeable terms, and the uses of these terms as labels for a literary tradition have always been entwined with political realities and national identities. Furthermore, literature in medieval Britain and Ireland was not entirely, nor indeed mostly, written in the English language. Works in Latin, Anglo-Norman French, Middle Welsh, and Old Irish all survive alongside works in the languages now known to us as Old and Middle English. Many of these non-English texts had a profound influence on the literature that was written in English.

For the medieval period, the word “British” derives from the Roman name for early **Celtic** settlers (the “Britons”) in what we now call the British Isles; “English” refers to the **Germanic** invaders and settlers who began arriving in the fifth century, pushed the Britons to the west and north (now Wales and Scotland) and eventually ruled the central part of the island. Note that “Germanic” does not mean “German”. Germanic refers to a group of people speaking related dialects from which English, German, Dutch, and the Scandinavian languages are descended. For many centuries, the English defined themselves by their difference from the Britons, and *vice versa*. At the same time, those who attempted to claim legitimate rulership of England made strategic use of the “British” tradition, perhaps most obviously in the stories that developed around King Arthur, whose origins lie deep in British legendary history.

The **vernacular** in the Middle Ages refers to languages that were spoken, as opposed to the primarily literary language, which was Latin.

Finally, the very word “literature” (deriving from the Latin *litterae* “letters”) implies an existence in writing, but a great deal of what remains in written form from the Middle Ages had a prior existence as, or owes enormous debts to, oral forms. Most of what we now read as medieval English literature was written to be heard, not read. Texts of **vernacular** works in the Middle Ages are not as solidly fixed—as “textual”—as works of modern literature, or of medieval works in Latin, for that matter. Modern literary culture tends to regard the written (really printed) text, fixed and

Make sure that you memorise the dates of the Middle Ages and can state them at a moment’s notice. It’s a really bad sign if a student takes a course and can’t tell you when the literature they are studying was written.

Also, make a note of the spelling conventions. “Middle Ages” is conventionally capitalised; “medieval” (or “mediaeval” in the United Kingdom) is not. “Medieval” should not be spelled “mid-” with or “evil”. See the discussion on “getting medieval” below.

inert, as the primary or “real” form of a literary work. But for some medieval works, especially those from the earlier Middle Ages, the written text seems to be almost an afterthought, little more than an aid to the memory of the reader/performer who recreates the “real” work by voicing the text out loud.

Reading a single-text—one work between two covers—on its own would also be a relatively unfamiliar experience for many medieval readers, who made extensive use of collections of texts. Medieval manuscripts that contain multiple works may be anything from carefully planned volumes presented to a patron, to somewhat haphazard gatherings of texts, to collections composed by an individual for his or her own use; our current knowledge of medieval literary culture could rightly be said to rest on medieval anthologies. The effort to determine the relationship between texts in medieval manuscripts, the intentions of the creators of such compilations and their effect upon readers, is one of the most interesting and important areas of contemporary medieval studies. Despite this, many students only encounter individual texts in isolation from their manuscript context.

The drawing of artificial lines, whether geographical or temporal, is a profound limitation on one’s understanding of the history of western literature. Medieval culture did not come to an end on New Year’s Eve 1499, just as Roman culture did not die at the stroke of midnight on December 31, 499. Change takes place gradually. However, sometimes artificial boundaries are useful aids (if not taken too seriously) for locating prominent cultural developments in certain time periods. In English literary history one of the most obvious divisions lies between the literature of the Anglo-Saxons—the English before the Norman Conquest (1066)—and that of the English after the Conquest. The English language is referred to as **Old English** before the Conquest and **Middle English** afterwards.

The term “medieval” is sometimes mistakenly used only for the period after the Norman Conquest, with horrible terms like “the Dark Ages” used for the earlier period. Don’t do this. Use “medieval” for the whole period from 500-1500. What’s wrong with “the Dark Ages”? Read on and see.

Old English (which used to be called “Anglo-Saxon” before World War I) had in fact begun changing somewhat earlier, but the education system suppressed these changes in the written language. Nice dates for the two linguistic periods are 500-1100 for **Old English** and 1100-1500 for **Middle English**. Anything after that is **Modern English**.

Within these two broadly drawn periods further divisions can be made: early Old English literature, as far as we can reconstruct it, differs markedly from the literature after the reign of Alfred the Great (d. 899), who sought to begin a program of vernacular literacy and bestowed a certain royal authority on English as a quasi-official literary language.

After the Conquest, although manuscripts in English were produced and read in somewhat reduced numbers, Norman French was the language of aristocratic culture in England, and therefore of much of the literature. In the absence of schools and pedagogical traditions, English began to manifest the changes that characterise Middle English.

From the Norman Conquest to the beginning of middle of the fourteenth century (the **Early Middle English** period), English literature displays various “transitional” stages in linguistic development and literary culture. Gradually, English began to take its place alongside the culturally more prestigious Latin (the language of the Church) and French (the language of the nobility, of law, and of administration); authors increasingly chose to write literary texts in English for aristocratic

readers. The fifteenth century saw the beginnings of a re-development of a written standard, and an outpouring of literary works (particularly of a devotional nature) that fostered and responded to rising literacy rates. With the advent of printing, books became ever more widely available and in the sixteenth century the standard became more “fixed”, even as the language was rapidly changing again into Modern English.

Getting Medieval



When Marsellus Wallace makes this famous threat in Quentin Tarantino’s 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*, he is not exactly using the term “medieval” in a scholarly manner. Rather, he is employing a host of modern associations about the Middle Ages, particularly that they were characterised by violence. You see similar negative associations with the terms “medieval” and “Middle Ages” in expressions like “His behaviour is positively medieval” or “That will send us right back to the Middle Ages”. It is important to realise that these associations come from our modern tendency to define ourselves against a darker and culturally inferior past. But, if such associations are based on any historical knowledge, it tends to be highly simplified. It is important not to let modern cultural prejudices influence your reading of medieval texts. The poet Tony Harrison, writing about the illuminated initials (decorated capital letters) in the *Lindisfarne Gospels* (produced around the year 700), likens the violence of the Viking raids on the churches that produced such great works of art to the bombing of Baghdad during the first Gulf War in 1991. The churches were destroyed

by raiders gung-ho for booty and berserk,
 the sort of soldiery that’s still recruited
 to do today’s dictators’ dirty work,
 but the initials in St John and in St Mark
 graced with local cormorants in ages,
 we of a darker still keep calling Dark,
 survive in those illuminated pages.
 The word of God so beautifully scripted
 by Eadfrith and Billfrith the anchorite
 Pentagon conners have once again conscripted
 to gloss the cross on the precision sight.¹

We only show our blindness to the darkness in our own society if we refer to the distant past as “the Dark Ages”.

Negative prejudices about the Middle Ages are deeply rooted in the modern consciousness, and in any event, recognising one’s own prejudices can be difficult. Think of the many protests of “I’m not a racist” by people who have just made some gross generalisation about Jews or black people (or

¹ From “Initial Illumination”, c.1992. See Harrison reciting the full poem at http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xfdzi8_tony-harrison-initial-illumination_creation.

name your ethnic group). The urge to generalise is not limited to non-academic contexts. Andrew Galloway provides the following example:

A recent essay in a respected journal on international politics—surveying the rise of “gang-controlled communities in Jamaica” and other developing countries, the growth of multinational corporations and increasing entwining of major cities to other international cities more closely than to anything nearby—declares that we are entering a “New Middle Ages”, since the integrity of the modern state, the writer believes, is disintegrating on every side. The historical parallel—appearing more than a few times during the last quarter century—is provocative. But it has serious limits. One is that the image it offers for “the Middle Ages” easily ends up as a luridly “primitive” and quasi-tribal tableau: “the [Jamaican] gangs demonstrate, almost celebrate, their independence and defiance of authority at raucous late-night dances patrolled by local cadres. Such warlordism would have been familiar to the western Europeans of a millennium ago” (J. Rapley, “The new Middle Ages”, *Foreign Affairs* 85(3), May/June 2006: 95-103 (100)).²

The key to avoiding generalisations like these is to catch yourself making statements without documented evidence. Another check is to ask yourself whether the statements you are making would apply as well to the year 900 as they would to the years 1200 or 1900. If you think conditions were the same over the course of a thousand years (some of those years outside the medieval period), chances are you’re over-generalising. Go back and research more closely what conditions were like closer to the precise dates of the text you are discussing.

Another dangerous term is “feudal”. Feudalism was a very successful socio-economic system, which developed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and survived well into the modern period. You can certainly use this term, but make sure that you are not using it to mean something like “backward”.

Getting Historical

Food for thought: Literary texts are not accurate depictions of historical conditions in the Middle Ages; they are imaginative responses to aspects of those conditions. However, the production and use of literary texts were themselves historical acts, like births, deaths, wars, and political events that could contribute to the very conditions to which future literature might respond.

To avoid “getting medieval” on the Middle Ages (that is, doing violence to them), we need to get historical. We must understand the literary works of the period by learning more about their historical context. Often these works of imagination can shed light on the context itself, but not in any simple way. If we read about knights fighting dragons, this does not mean that it was a historical reality in the Middle Ages. If literature fails to mention whole sectors of society, that doesn’t mean that they didn’t exist. Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636) pointed out that history is not simply “what happened” in the past, but the *stories we tell* about what happened in the past. Events, objects, even stories do not speak for themselves; they have to be arranged and explained, looked at and looked into, and gradually placed in a context constructed from our interpretation of other

objects, events, and stories. The texts we study in fact form part of the larger context.

² Andrew Galloway, *Medieval Literature and Culture* (London: Continuum, 2006), 1.

So the questions we might ask as we approach these texts involve less what they “are” than what they “do”, what they might mean not only to their imagined original audiences but to us, and how that meaning might change as our knowledge develops. How can we understand them in anything like their original forms with our inevitably modern minds? To what extent can we negotiate the difference between the present and the past? How can we gain access to the complex web of cultural assumptions embedded within early literature? Our best bet is to create our own narrative of the *complexity* of historical conditions that formed the milieu for the surviving literature of the Middle Ages.

A (Much Too) Short History of the Study of the Middle Ages

In the studying the Middle Ages, we are following in a long tradition that stretches as far back as the Renaissance. It is as important to have an historical perspective on this tradition as it is to have an understanding of the medieval period itself. What follows here is a very short overview to provide you with a sense of the scope of scholarly work. In practice, it should be fleshed out through more extensive reading of scholarly literature.

As suggested above, the Renaissance brought a strong sense that an age was coming to an end and new one (or a renewal of the Classical age—Renaissance means “rebirth”) was beginning. In England, the Reformation and the official designation of the Protestant Church of England as the state religion, tended to associate medieval works with the Catholic Church, encouraging a mixture of contempt and longing. Much knowledge of medieval culture had already been lost, and there was a strong awareness that the language of what remained was already becoming inaccessible. Scholarly **antiquaries** like Archbishop Matthew Parker (1504-1575) sought to salvage the surviving fragments of medieval culture, often with their own ideological purposes in mind (Parker seems to have been interested in identifying native “English” religious traditions as a foundation for an independent Church of England). In the period before the building of great university and national libraries, the collections of antiquaries like Parker played an important role in preserving medieval culture. The beginnings of systematic study of Old English language and literature tended to form part of a program of defining “national” heritage, one that would continue into the nineteenth century. Later medieval literature, when it was not dismissed as “papist” or seen to anticipate the rise of Protestantism, tended to be viewed as the embryo of literary tradition on which later authors would build. Medieval poets in particular were viewed as somewhat imperfect models (albeit with sparks of genius) on which later writers might improve. This is most clearly illustrated by John Dryden’s declaration that Geoffrey Chaucer (d. 1400) was the “Father of English poetry” but that “he lived in the infancy of our poetry, and...nothing is brought to perfection at the first” (in the *Preface to Fables Ancient and Modern*, 1700).

How to make good use of scholarly literature: Always begin by reading something published during the last decade. Then check the footnotes. What was the author of the article or book reading (and responding to)? Follow the footnote trail back in time. Don’t limit your reading to scholarship published forty or fifty years ago. You want your understanding to be historically informed, but up to date.

In the nineteenth century, there was an explosion of scholarly work on medieval English literature, much of it inspired by the growing nationalist movements of Europe and North America. The activity was encouraged by the emergence of English departments at universities, which sought to bring the scholarly methods that already existed for studying Classical culture to the English vernacular tradition. The title of H.M. Chadwick’s *The Heroic Age* (1912) provides a strong sense of

much of the direction of scholarly enquiry into literature from the earlier medieval period, but the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are often described themselves as a “heroic age” of scholarly editing, which made texts often surviving only in single manuscripts (like *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) available for study by students and members of the public through printed editions.³ In 1864 Frederick J. Furnivall founded the **Early English Text Society (EETS)**, which produced scores of editions of medieval texts in part to supply the words for the recently conceived *New English Dictionary* (later renamed the *Oxford English Dictionary*), which sought to trace the historical meanings of all English words in use after 1050. These publications formed part of an active tradition of “**philology**” (which literally means the love of words) that sought to reconstruct the lost linguistic features and literary traditions of the medieval past.

In the twentieth century, philology—which was initially almost the sole area of study in university English departments—was gradually supplanted by a form of literary criticism that sought to identify those literary qualities of medieval texts which were appreciated in works of modern literature (irony, drama, satire, ambiguity, complexity of character, and the like). This influence of the scholarly movement known as the **New Criticism** persisted through the 1950s. In the 1960s, a deliberate “historicist” opposition was mounted to what were seen as “romantic” values foisted upon Chaucer and other medieval writers. Scholars like D.W. Robertson Jr argued that medieval literature was shaped by Christian theological principles and should be interpreted through the lens of these principles. This approach has come to be known as **Robertsonianism**. In this view, medieval literature was almost always ironic or allegorical, and, as the vigorous opponents to this strategy claimed, almost never directly appreciated “just as literature”. Here the Middle Ages was seen as decisively different from the modern world, and any suggestion that modernity began there was viewed as anachronistic.

A more detailed and scholarly pursuit of Christian meanings and images soon focused on detailed **source study**. This continued the philological tradition more than the “exegetical” (interpretive) tradition, and it also sought to show that literary “meaning” was better available by way of very particular Christian allusions and contexts. In these terms, medieval English literature was opened onto a large realm of Latin, and sometimes other non-English Christian materials in pursuit of textual sources and analogues for vernacular literature. Such work helped bring literature into a domain of “medieval studies” as a broad intellectual and cultural region, moving medieval literary studies toward the more varied connections to cultural context that, impelled by other trends in literary studies generally, soon began to dominate.

Current Issues and Debates

From the 1970s on, medieval literary scholars have increasingly been presented with other options for thinking about literature as part of medieval culture. In many branches of literary scholarship, more anthropological and cultural kinds of analysis of literature and “discourse” emerged from feminist theory, cultural theory, and a range of Marxist-influenced social views that were influencing or redefining formalist and structuralist criticism. Medieval scholars seemed particularly well positioned to take these up, although they often reveal an aversion to applying to medieval literature something so obviously “modern” as the language and philosophical lineages of “theory”. “What is an author?” Foucault asked; and medievalists showed that they could see far better than Foucault himself how medieval literature, with its very different sense of authorship, might at least indirectly answer that question. “How does an encounter with social authority define the self?” a range of Marxist theorists from Louis Althusser to Raymond Williams asked; again

³ Although many early editions have been superseded by more recent ones, most of them can be read on Google Books or the Internet Archive. *The Heroic Age* itself can be read at <https://archive.org/details/heroicage00chaduoft>.

medievalists showed that they were in a position to pursue that point in distinctive ways. A series of feminists, from Gayle Rubin to Julia Kristeva, asked “What are the images and functions of women?”; and medievalists could pursue a wide range of relatively unstudied materials and new perspectives on well-known ones. These are just some of the ways that medievalists have been inspired by (or rebutted) developments in modern theory. A notable development is the use of Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction, not on medieval texts themselves, but on writing *about* medieval texts to create a better understanding of the representation and role of the Middle Ages in modern societies. This has given rise to a whole sub-discipline known as “medievalism”.

The results of such dense connections between literature and cultural outlooks, contexts, and modes of power are often richer histories or kinds of connections than in easily transportable new theoretical concepts. Where students and scholars in later periods can assume some basic historical contexts, those in medieval literature must sometimes be the first to establish and explore, or significantly reformulate them. One of the most exciting developments of recent years, fuelled by the increasing availability of texts in digital form, is the study of how individual manuscripts fit their contexts and shape the “genres” and “forms” of medieval literature. Scholars pursuing all manner of issues have turned to the immediate moment, or layers of moments, of a work’s social moment and material “presence” in medieval copies, read, used, and remade for particular purposes.

Print technologies historically encouraged notions the text as immaterial. The shape or destruction of a text’s physical container was of little significance since thousands of exact copies might be found elsewhere from the same print run. Studying medieval manuscripts (hand-written books) encourages a focus on the *materiality* of the text: its physical form at the moment of creation and at individual moments in its subsequent history. New “digital editions” of medieval manuscripts make it possible to investigate manuscript materiality in detail. A perfect example is the *Saint Albans Psalter* online: <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/>.

As all this shows, the historical situating of medieval literature has certainly not disappeared, but it has changed focus to engage immediate social contexts more deeply and too look around or “under” some of the most traditionally monumental figures or traditions. The expansion of the canon of literature from just the “Great Books” (“Great Texts”, would be more appropriate for the Middle Ages) to embrace less significant works of literature, those deemed to have be exemplary of some notion of “genius”, genres which may not have immediate appeal today, has challenged us to think more rigorously about the entire medieval literary tradition.

A (Too) Short History of Medieval Britain

The historical overview below is not meant to tell you everything you need to know, but it will get you started with some major names, terms, and concepts. All of these are typically explained in no more than one or two sentences, **which is not enough**. Over the course of the semester, you should read more about individual items to deepen your knowledge.

Roman and Celtic Britain

We know little of the inhabitants of Britain before 500 BC, when groups of people that we now call the Celts (pronounced “Kelts”) began to migrate from continental Europe to Britain and Ireland. The Celtic population in Britain, known as the **Britons**, gradually came under Roman influence starting in the first century BC (Julius Caesar invaded in 55 BC). Eventually, the Romans conquered most of the island, except for what is now Scotland, then largely inhabited by a Celtic or possibly pre-Celtic people called the **Picts**. Throughout most of what is now England and Wales, however, the Romans were successful in establishing administrative structures that made *Britannia* a province of the Roman Empire. Though far from the heart of the Empire, Britain was clearly a rich and valuable province, and much of the population was thoroughly Romanised. It is now thought that the island was densely populated; it enjoyed a thriving money economy and commerce, and sturdy traditions of Roman administration, education, and literacy. When Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire during the fourth century AD, it spread in Britain as well.

At the turn of the fifth century the Roman legions stationed in Britain were withdrawn for deployment in the heart of the Empire, in part to defend Rome from various barbarian tribes pouring across its eastern frontiers. Soon afterwards, the Picts and a group of people from Northern Ireland called the **Scots** began to make raids into the territories of the Romanised Britons. In desperation, the Britons turned to the Germanic peoples of continental Europe (who were, ironically, distantly related to many of barbarians attacking Rome) for assistance. The **Angles** (not “Anglos”), **Saxons**, and Jutes, inhabitants of the coastal areas of what is now northwestern Germany and Denmark, were quite willing to work as soldiers for hire, but once they established themselves in Britain, they began to demand land of their own and began to seize power from their employers. Over time, more Germanic migrants came to Britain and continued to encroach on British territory.

The Scots were Irish? OMG, that’s so confusing! Well, only in hindsight. In later history, the Scots, unable to make further inroads in southern Britain, would end up conquering the Picts. The country of Scotland then acquired its name from its new rulers.

Relations between these Germanic invaders and the British are hard to reconstruct, but it appears that British culture was eventually supplanted. It appears that a large group of Britons fled to the Roman province of Armorica in what is today northern France, where they became known as the **Bretons** (and province renamed **Brittany**). Many of those who remained in Britain intermingled with their Germanic conquerors and adopted the culture of the new ruling class. The assimilation was complete enough that few words of British origin seem to have been adopted in Old English, the language descended from the dialects of the new Germanic population of Britain.

Whatever the reasons for its erosion, by around 600 a distinctively British culture was largely confined to Wales, Cornwall, and southern Scotland. Although they had been marginalised geographically and politically, however, the Celtic peoples continued to exert a powerful shaping influence on what would become English literature. Their influence persisted centuries later in the retelling of Welsh legends, in the survival of the genre known as the “Breton lay”, and in the fragmentary memories of British kings who led a temporarily successful resistance against the Germanic invaders—stories that formed the kernel of truth at the heart of the legends of King Arthur, arguably the great political myth of the Middle Ages.

“Germanic”: another confusing term!
 “Germanic” refers to the common language and culture of the regions surrounding the North Sea. Germanic peoples were originally more widespread in Europe but were elsewhere assimilated into the Roman Empire. The German language is descended from the dialects of Germanic peoples, but so are English, Dutch, and the Scandinavian languages. So remember, “Germanic” and “German” do not mean the same thing.

The Anglo-Saxons

The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes (oh my!) soon set up a myriad of mini-kingdoms in Britain, warring with each other as much as with the Britons. Gradually, these kingdoms began to consolidate, and in the next two centuries three of them would emerge as dominant: **Wessex**, **Mercia**, and **Northumbria**. The inhabitants of Wessex were known as the **West Saxons**, which betrays their origin. Linguistic evidence shows that Mercia and Northumbria were settled mostly by Angles (the poor Jutes were assimilated quickly by the other kingdoms).



What happened next is rather remarkable. The Latin chroniclers (and remaining Britons) of the day typically referred to all these groups as *Saxonici* “Saxons” regardless of their origin. But the Germanic inhabitants of Britain referred to themselves as *Engla cynn* “kin of the Angles”—even those of Saxon origin. And they referred to their language as *Englisc* “English”. Although a politically unified “England” would not emerge for several centuries, it appears that a sense of cultural unity

emerged quite quickly. As a result, modern scholarship refers to them collectively as the **Anglo-Saxons**.

During the early migration period, Anglo-Saxon society probably resembled that of the Germanic peoples on the continent. In the first century AD, the Roman historian Tacitus visited the continental Germanic tribes and described them as notably warlike. Although Tacitus certainly exhibited cultural biases and did not depict the whole of Germanic society, he does seem to have accurately described the social unit around which the leadership was organised, which he called a *comitatus*. This was a tightly-knit society of warriors surrounding a lord to whom they owed their love and loyalty in exchange for gifts and protection. Most likely the early Anglo-Saxons were organised in this way. They had a native writing system called “runes”, but it was rarely used for anything other than carving monuments or simple inventories on bone or wood. The Anglo-Saxons had no culture of literacy and preserved their learning through memory and oral transmission. Perhaps most importantly, they were pagan, worshipping a pantheon of northern gods such as Woden and Thurs (from which we get the names “Wednesday” and “Thursday”). We know little of the pagan beliefs of the Anglo-Saxons. Much of what we do know comes from their Germanic cousins in Scandinavia, who were converted to Christianity much later. There must have been a fair amount of similarity across the Germanic-speaking world. For instance, we know the Anglo-Saxon gods Woden and Thurs today by their Scandinavian forms Odin and Thor.

Sometimes modern scholars follow the practice of Latin chroniclers by referring to the Anglo-Saxons as Saxons. This is probably done as a kind of shorthand.

Today use to “Anglo-Saxon” can mean “Anglo-American” or even ethnically “white”. These usages are misappropriations of the historical Anglo-Saxons to refer to modern cultural phenomena.

But Christianity continued to have a strong presence in Britain, in part because of the remaining British population and in part because the early arrival of papal missionaries. In 597 Pope Gregory the Great sent **Augustine** (later Saint Augustine of Canterbury) to convert the *Angli*, as he was told they were called.

In the twelfth century, a tradition emerged that Augustine attempted to preach the gospel in a Dorset village. The residents were so incensed that they expelled Augustine, sending him away with ray’s tails (Latin *muculae*) hanging from his cloak. Ever since, the English have been called “muggles” and are rumoured to have tails under their clothes. The Scots and the French continued to call the English muggles until the nineteenth century. Be amused by the meaning the term has acquired more recently.

Don’t confuse this Saint Augustine of Canterbury with Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD), an important theologian and one of the early fathers of Church.

And the process of conversion proceeded gradually from that time on. In Northumbria, the Irish were also heavily engaged in missionary work and founded a network of monasteries in northern England. Apart from any question of spiritual benefit, conversion to Christianity offered the appeal of new political alliances with other Christian kings, and the considerable power of Latin literacy, law, science, philosophy, and education.

By the year 700, the Anglo-Saxons had almost completely converted to Christianity. The monasteries of Northumbria produced a flowering of learning, the most emblematic symbol of which is the Lindisfarne Gospels, an elaborately decorated copy of the Scriptures which fused Roman, Christian, Celtic, and Germanic cultures.



The opening page of the Gospel of St Matthew from the Lindisfarne Gospels, c. 700

This early cultural flowering came to a dramatic end in the 790s with the first wave of invasions by the various Scandinavian peoples known to history as **Vikings**, and organised monastic life seems to have fallen into a state of more or less complete disrepair in the course of the ninth century. The Vikings, whom the Anglo-Saxons tended to refer to as “Danes”, regardless of their origin, conquered Northumbria and parts of Mercia, and quickly began to establish a permanent presence in Britain. In northern and eastern England today, many place names refer to Danish settlements (anywhere ending in *-by*, such as Grimsby, Derby, Kirby, or *-thorpe*, such as Althorpe, Swanthorpe) and later forms of English in this region developed a heavy Scandinavian influence. The Scandinavian advance was eventually halted by the King of Wessex, **Alfred the Great** in 879. Mercia was essentially divided between Wessex and the Danes, and the north and east of England became known as the **Danelaw**, the area under Danish legal jurisdiction.

For Alfred, the Viking conquests were the result of a failure to preserve the wisdom and learning that had once flourished amongst the Anglo-Saxons. He thus began promoting education and literary culture. What is of incalculable importance for the history of English literature is that he proposed to encourage the translation of Latin works into English and foster the cultivation of vernacular literacy. His program was successful enough to encourage the production of a large number of new texts written in English, not just translations, but poetry, and, perhaps most importantly, the creation of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the most authoritative historical source for the period. The *Chronicle* was a year-by-year account of events in England, updated annually, and in one manuscript as late as 1154.

In the tenth century, Alfred’s descendants began to consolidate their power and gradually extended it over the Danelaw. They also improved upon Alfred’s educational program by providing patronage for a re-organisation of **monastic** culture. **Monasteries** grew out of an “ascetic” tradition in Christianity in which individuals desired to remove themselves from worldly affairs in order to pursue a purer spiritual existence. Early Christians often became hermits for this purpose, but gradually they began to form communities (monasteries) in which to support one another in prayer while mitigating some of the harsher aspects of solitary life. As monastic communities grew, various “rules” (actually rule books) were devised to govern the lives of monks and nuns. The Benedictine Rule, authored by Saint Benedict in the sixth century, was adopted rigorously in England at the end of the tenth and early eleventh centuries as part of a wave of reforms and foundations of new

monasteries. This is known as the **Benedictine Reform**. Monasteries were natural places to encourage learning in English since they already had an established literary culture in Latin. The Benedictine Reform brought about a wave of new textual production in English, notably laws, homilies (sermons), and saints' lives. However, most of the surviving collections of Old English poetry date to this period.

By the 950s, they were able to claim to be kings of all "England", and from this time on, we can begin to use the term as a political entity. A renewed wave of Viking attacks in the last quarter of the tenth century weakened the monarchy, and, ultimately, King Æthelred II (r. 978-1016) and his children were forced to flee to Normandy in northern France. He was replaced by the Danish King Cnut (r. 1016-1035). Unlike earlier Viking invaders, Cnut was king of all of Denmark (which at the time also ruled Norway), and he thus ruled over a mini North Sea empire. More importantly, he was a Christian, continued to support the monasteries, and ruled according to English law. This explains why his rule, and that of his two sons Harold (r. 1035-1040) and Harthacnut (r. 1040-1042), was accepted by the English.

When Harthacnut died without an heir in 1042, Æthelred's son Edward (known as Edward the Confessor) was proclaimed king. Prior to his own death at the beginning of 1066, Edward probably entrusted the kingdom to Harold Godwinson, a powerful nobleman, who was accepted by the English as the new king. However, Duke William of Normandy insisted that Edward, who was half-Norman and who had grown up in Normandy, had promised the throne to him. Assembling an army, William invaded later in 1066. Harold was killed at the **Battle of Hastings**, and William had himself crowned king of England. This is known as the **Norman Conquest**, and William is known to history as **William the Conqueror**.

The Normans and Feudalism

The Norman Conquest of England in 1066 has a special place as a focal point in English history, partly because of its timing, almost exactly at the dividing line between the early and the later Middle Ages. As with all forms of periodization, this is of limited value; in Europe, many scholars speak of the central or High Middle Ages. French language and culture never threatened to extinguish the existing English language, but it did exert enormous and lasting influence on it. Many Anglo-Saxon institutions (especially the law) continued almost unchanged for a century or more. Perhaps for this reason the Norman invasion barely seems to register in the 1066 entry of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

Nevertheless, the Norman Conquest did help to change Britain in fundamental ways—most obviously in language, but also in social and economic culture. The greatest long-term impact came from the importation of feudalism, a socio-political system with roots in the old Germanic *comitatus*, but which had evolved on the continent in ways that it had not in England. While neither the lords nor peasants of Anglo-Saxon England had held legal title to their land in quite the way that we conceive of it today, they had in practice exercised rights over that

Normandy is the northernmost part of France, just across the English Channel from England. It was technically part of the kingdom of France, but the French king only really had nominal rule over most of the kingdom's territory. Most regions were controlled by powerful dukes and counts who owed allegiance to the king. Normandy had in fact been conquered by Vikings in the ninth century (Norman means "Northman"), but their descendants had been thoroughly assimilated to French culture and spoke a dialect of the French language. The Norman dialect of French as it developed in England is called Anglo-Norman French.

land similar to those that we would describe as rights of ownership. Under the Normans, by contrast, nobles held the land that they occupied as a **fief**; in return for the right to its use as part of a system of exchange. The king granted land to a nobleman as a fief; in return for the right to its use the nobleman was obliged to perform services for the king, including making payments at various times and providing armed knights whenever the king might demand them. The nobleman, in his turn, would grant land—again, as a fief—to a knight, who in return would owe to the nobleman military service and dues. The knight would typically retain a substantial portion of this land, and then divide the rest among the peasantry. There were obligations in the other direction, as well: knights were obliged to provide protection for the peasantry, nobles for the knights, and the king for the nobles. The relationship at each level was, in theory at least, entirely voluntary and often publicly proclaimed, with the **vassal** (or holder of the fief) kneeling and promising **homage** and fealty to his lord, and a kiss between the two then sealing their mutual obligation.

Feudalism comes from the Latin *feodum*, an adaptation of a Germanic word for property (from which we also get English “fee”). **Fief** is merely the medieval French equivalent. Other terms associated with feudalism betray how it evolved. **Vassal** originally meant “servant” in French, **homage** comes from French *home* “man”—it is a promise to become the lord’s man—and *fealty* is medieval French for loyalty. Feudalism never really existed in any form that purely matched the way it is described in a document like this one, certainly not in England. There were inevitably many local variations with feudal structures superimposed on pre-existing ones and non-feudal structures superimposed on feudal ones.

The institution of this new system was marked in a unique way by William through the compilation of the Domesday Book (so-called in reference to the “Day of Judgement” at the end of the world, from Old English *dom* “judgement”), an extraordinary survey on a county-by-county basis of all the lands held by the king and his vassals, recording all the obligations of landholders.



The Domesday Book

In 1179 the king's Lord Treasurer, Richard FitzNigel, claimed that “when this book is appealed to ... its sentence cannot be put quashed or set aside with impunity. That is why we have called the book ‘the Book of Judgement’ ... because its decisions, like those of the Last Judgement, are unalterable” (*Dialogus de Scaccario*, 64). But the Domesday Book was seldom used to settle disputes or clarify ownership. It has been argued that its purpose may have been more symbolic, an attempt to imagine the king’s ability to grant land and codify obligations by written charter, and that recording the disposition of property and population would somehow fix them permanently in that state. Regardless, the imposition of feudal obligations was fairly thorough in England; the Anglo-Saxon nobles were quickly assimilated, dispossessed, or killed, leaving William in effective control of England. Over time, the Normans made inroads in Wales and Scotland, and even Ireland, but these were more piecemeal.

The late eleventh century also saw the arrival of Jews in England. Christian disdain for moneylending and the exclusion of Jews from some professions meant that they tended to become strongly associated with, and very important in, the financial working of the kingdom (they were also important to the financing of new churches). Another important development of the later eleventh century, which would become much more central to civic life in the Middle Ages, was the rise of **guilds**—initially merchant guilds that exercised a monopoly over the trade in a particular area, but later craft guilds that established regulations allowing them to control who could practice a given craft and that offered social and financial support to their members, as well as regulating the quality of production. Guilds became increasingly important in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, particularly in England, and their rise coincided with the growth of urban centres and of new forms of religious devotion.

Henry II and an International Culture

Much of the forty years following the death of William the Conqueror in 1087 were consumed with the politics of having a ruling class with feet in both England and Normandy. William divided the two realms between his elder sons, and, after many years of infighting, his third son Henry I imposed control over both. The death of Henry's son in a shipwreck led to a crisis over the succession and a protracted civil war between Henry's nephew Stephen of Blois (who was crowned king in 1135) and Henry's daughter Mathilda. By the late 1140s, Mathilda placed her hopes in her son Henry of Anjou. In 1153, Stephen was pressured to recognise Henry as his heir, and when Stephen died the next year, Henry ascended the throne as Henry II (r. 1154-1189).

If William the Conqueror was the key figure in establishing Norman and feudal rule in England, his great-grandson Henry was the key figure in its preservation and extension through the later Middle Ages. Henry's coming to the throne brought an end to almost twenty years of civil war, in the course of which barons and church leaders had taken advantage of the collapse of royal authority to expand local powers. Many of them began to encroach on land claimed by the crown, and to build private castles to protect their domains. Henry put a stop to these practices, taking back lands, tearing down castles, and reorganising royal authority in a fashion that was increasingly supported by standardised records and documents. Central authority over legal matters, which had previously been largely restricted to capital cases, was now extended to legal



Henry II

matters of all sort. Henry II undertook the first major legal reforms since the Norman Conquest. This is why many of our legal terms—crime, punishment, court, justice—are of French origin. Henry is responsible for the creation of **Common Law**, the basis for the legal system in the English-speaking world. Amongst the principles of Common Law are the use of precedent to decide legal cases and the right to trial by a jury of one's peers. In fact, Henry made jury trials a permanent part of the legal landscape, so next time you get called for jury service, he is the one you should blame.

Henry II was the son of Mathilda and Geoffrey, Count of Anjou (the county just south of Normandy), known as Geoffrey Plantagenet (French for “sprig of broom”, a heather-like plant which he wore in his hats). **Plantagenet** became the dynastic name for Henry's heirs. However, historians refer to the reigns of Henry II and his two sons, Richard I and John, which stretched from 1154-1216, as **Angevin England**. “Angevin” is the adjective form of Anjou.

The expansion of the crown's legal control came in part at the expense of the church, and provoked one of the most famous incidents of his Henry's reign, his clash with Thomas Becket

According to oral tradition, Henry in a fit of anger uttered words to the effect of “Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?”, and four of his knights travelled to Canterbury Cathedral, where they did just that. Following Becket’s death, miracles reported, and Becket was soon declared a saint. His shrine in Canterbury Cathedral became a pilgrimage site in the later Middle Ages and is the destination of the pilgrims in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.

(1118-1170), Archbishop of Canterbury, who wanted the clergy to retain their right to be tried in church courts independent of the secular legal system. The Archbishop was subsequently murdered, allegedly on Henry’s orders. The outcry was so great that Henry was forced to perform public penance—and to accept that the church would, to some extent, remain outside the realm of royal authority.

If Henry’s extension of the power of the English throne throughout the realm was unprecedented, so too was his extension of that power within and beyond the British Isles. He was able to establish considerable political control of the Anglo-Norman nobility that had taken root in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. Like his predecessors, he was Duke of Normandy, and, additionally, he was Count of Anjou through his father. With his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152 he had acquired control of much of southern France, bringing England into an international cultural sphere. Historians refer to the areas under Henry’s control as

the **Angevin Empire**, which stretched from the Scottish border to the Pyrenees.

The period just after the Norman Conquest coincided with important developments in European learned culture. Universities emerged from cathedral and monastic schools when students and masters began to form private “scholastic” guilds. The first university was the University of Bologna (1088), which was soon followed by the universities of Paris (1150), Oxford (1167), and Cambridge (1209), to name a few. All instruction was in Latin. Teaching was oriented around the seven liberal arts: the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric), which were taught first, and the

quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). Subjects such as law, medicine, and theology could be studied only after receipt of a masters degree. If you wanted to study English, you would have to wait about 700 years (the first English departments were founded in the nineteenth century). Universities were the centre of the philosophy known as **Scholasticism**. Scholasticism placed a strong emphasis on dialectical reasoning to extend knowledge by inference, and to resolve contradictions (particularly those between various written authorities, and between Christian and Classical thinkers such as Aristotle). England produced many of the outstanding thinkers of the scholastic movement. One of its founders, Anselm of Canterbury (originally Italian, but Archbishop of Canterbury on and off between 1097 and 1107) was one of its founders.

An equally important (and not unrelated) development was the beginning of the **Crusades**. No simple account of the Crusades can be given here, but their central motive was to defend Christian interests in the Near East, and particularly to re-take the Holy Lands, which had been captured by Muslim invaders (known in Europe as **Saracens**) centuries before. The First Crusade was launched in 1096, when Pope Urban II appealed to the kings and nobility of western Europe to halt the



The tempestuous relationship between Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine was the subject of the Academy Award-winning Best Picture for 1968, *The Lion in Winter*, starring Peter O’Toole and Katharine Hepburn.

advance of the Seljuq Turks and retake the city of Jerusalem. The response, mostly from French and Normans (but some Englishmen) was tremendous. Jerusalem was captured, and a new Kingdom of Jerusalem founded, along with a number of other “crusader states”. Territories changed hands frequently between Christians and Muslims in the ensuing centuries, leading to further crusades. In addition to expeditions in the Middle East, crusades were launched against Muslims in Spain and Portugal and heretics in France. Apart from complex repercussions for power structures in Europe, one the lasting effects of the Crusades was the growth of a culture of **chivalry** or knighthood, with defence of the Faith as one of its central characteristics.

The Thirteenth Century

Henry II’s royal authority was scaled back under his successors. Richard I (1189-1199), a keen crusader, spent very little time in England. He was followed by his brother John (1199-1216). An ill-advised marriage to a French noblewoman invoked the wrath of the French king Phillip Augustus, who responded by invading and seizing Normandy in 1204. The loss of the duchy forced both the English king and nobility, who had formerly held lands in both territories to begin to identify more firmly as “English”. It is probably not coincidence that the production of literature in Middle English begins to increase from this time on. In order to raise money for his struggle against Phillip, John imposed extraordinary taxes on English barons and other nobles; the barons rebelled and forced the king to sign a document setting out the rights and obligations of both nobles and of the king himself, and making explicit that the king was not to contravene these customary arrangements without consulting the barons. The document also reaffirmed the freedom of the English church, particularly the freedom from royal interference in the election of bishops or other officeholders. Under this **Magna Carta** (1215), or “Great Charter”, the power of the king was for the first time limited by a written document (although it also instituted many of the increased royal powers acquired by Henry II). The king’s advisory council of barons would eventually evolve into Parliament.

John’s reputation as a petty, incompetent ruler is not entirely unwarranted, but much of it derives from later tradition. Medieval tales of Robin Hood were originally set in the fourteenth century and were gradually moved back in time in modern re-tellings. In the nineteenth century, the stories were fixed in the 1190s when the then Prince John ruled for his brother Richard, who was away fighting in the Third Crusade.

1215 was a momentous year in medieval Europe. In addition to the signing of Magna Carta, this year witnessed the **Fourth Lateran Council**, a major gathering of church leaders under the guidance of Pope Innocent III. Lateran IV represented an extraordinarily far-reaching attempt to unify Christian practice and raise standards of Christian observance. The Canons of the Council covered almost all aspects of Christian life, and their effects on both religious instruction resounded through the rest of the Middle Ages. Christians from now on were required to confess their sins formally and receive Communion at least once a year, and the sacrament of the altar was officially declared to involve transubstantiation, meaning that the body and blood of Christ were actually present, rather than merely represented by, the bread and wine consecrated at the Mass (a doctrine that would later become a matter of serious dispute). A new network of regulation was put into place to govern marriages, with secret marriages prohibited and marriage itself declared a sacrament. Greater attention was also placed on pastoral care of the laity by the clergy. Individual Christians were expected to learn to recite a small number of prayers, but it was important that the Bible be safely interpreted for the laity by educated church

intermediaries. Only towards the end of the Middle Ages did this become controversial, and it is one of the issues that eventually gave rise to the Protestant Reformation.

Non-Christians and unorthodox believers fared badly under edicts of the Fourth Lateran Council. The canons (rules) include extensive commentary on the need to control and excommunicate heretics; they require Jews and Saracens to wear distinctive clothing; and they prohibit Jews from holding public office; and they encourage crusading against Muslims in the Holy Land. Massacres of Jews occurred periodically in English cities, and in 1290 King Edward I expelled the Jews from England. Heresy remained a concern throughout Europe, although in this period the persecutions were more severe in France than in England.

The Fourth Lateran Council was in part a response to increased lay devotion and interest in religion, which offered a challenge to the sometimes inadequate pastoral care provided by the clergy. Ignorance amongst the clergy was a common complaint, but is striking that some of the greatest works of Middle English religious literature survive in a closely related group of texts from around this same time: the *Ancrene Riwe* (Rule for Anchoresses) and the saints' lives and other spiritual guidance texts that accompany it in the manuscripts testify to the presence of learned and committed religious men and women in early thirteenth-century England. No doubt these texts were a part of the same desire to increase the rigour of religious devotion.

New religious movements—often instigated by the laity—arose in large numbers in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These movements were sometimes accepted by the church and sometimes declared heretical. The growth in such movements was so great that the Council decreed that no new religious movements could be instituted after 1215, a decree that was largely observed. The most significant of the new groups, particularly for literary history, were the fraternal orders or **friars** (from Latin *frater*, French *frère* “brother”): the Augustinian hermits, Carmelites, and, especially, the Dominicans and Franciscans. Like the monks of the early church, the members of these new movements embraced poverty and learning. Unlike monks of previous eras, however, they devoted themselves to carrying religion directly to the people, rather than an enclosed life; their aim was to emulate the life of the Apostles (early followers of Christ). Founded in the first part of the thirteenth century, they spread with great rapidity, and had a substantial presence in the British Isles by around 1250.

The tremendous growth in the European economy from the eleventh century onward had fostered the development of ever-larger towns and cities. Urban growth in turn made possible an increasing specialisation of labour that is reflected in the rise of craft guilds and, in another sense, the friars themselves. The religious and civic cultures that each represented were deeply entwined. The mission of the friars promoted the translation and dissemination of religious teaching among the laity, and their energy in this activity made their writings an important influence on the development of literature in the vernacular languages of Europe. Their emergence and quick expansion both coincided with and furthered the rise of lay involvement in religious life, whether this took the form of pilgrimage, of spiritual reading and writing, of attendance at sermons and church services, or of devotion to saints' cults, particularly that of the Virgin Mary. Members of the church hierarchy also contributed to religious education. The Anglo-Norman *Manuel des Pechiez* (c. 1270)—translated into English by Robert Mannyng in 1303 as *Handlyng Synne*—aimed to give laypeople the knowledge they needed to live in accordance with Christian teaching.

Despite the intellectual flowering of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, education remained in essence a luxury for most of the population. Not only labourers, but many of the nobility and even some of the clergy never learned to read, although the widespread practice of reading or reciting aloud—both secular and religious works—and of course the experience of hearing sermons meant

that those who could not read were not cut off from literate culture. Our own inevitable focus on written sources that survive should not blind us to the ways in which those who could not themselves read or write still had considerable access to the great narratives and images of their culture.

The English Monarchy

With the death of John, historians begin to refer to Plantagenet England, a period that would last from 1216 to the death of the last Plantagenet king, Richard III, in 1485. John's son, Henry III (1216-1272), came to the throne as a child, and under his rule the monarchy lost ground to both internal and external forces. The English barons continually challenged his authority, culminating in his effective deposition in 1264-1265 by forces led by Simon de Monfort. Henry never regained effective power, further consolidating the principle of the king's limited rulership and the idea that the people of the realm (particularly the nobility) should take part in its governance. The losses of French territory continued to contribute to a growing tendency for the ruling inhabitants of England to regard themselves as *English* (rather than Norman, Angevin, French, and so on); the broader participation in government in the course of the century may have solidified this tendency. By the early fourteenth century language could be seen as the unifying force in the nation: "both the learned and unlearned man who were born in England can understand English", asserts one commentator of the period.

When Edward I conquered Wales, he declared his son (later Edward II) "Prince of Wales". By tradition, the heir to the English throne has carried that title ever since. The current Prince of Wales is Prince Charles.

This seems an opportune time to point out that Wales comes from Old English *wealas* "foreigners", the Anglo-Saxons' term for the Welsh, or Britons. Make sure that you don't accidentally make Prince Charles a lord of large marine mammals (whales).

Henry's son Edward I (1272-1307) managed to mend the relationship between the monarchy and the people, in part by strengthening administrative structures related to law (Chancery), finances (the Exchequer), and governance (the Council). He also conquered Wales, which never regained its independence, although resistance to English rule continued. Although he never managed to subdue Scotland, he managed to assert considerable political influence over that country as well (as portrayed in the 1995 Mel Gibson film *Braveheart*).

Edward II (1307-1327) was frequently at odds with his nobles and was eventually deposed by his wife Isabella, the daughter of the king of France, and her lover Roger Mortimer. He was succeeded by his son Edward III (1327-1377), whose long reign provided a certain stability. Edward forcefully asserted his claims to French territory through his French mother, and began the long-lasting conflict that came to be known as the **Hundred Years' War** (1337-1453). This conflict displayed the ongoing contradictoriness of medieval English attitudes towards France: Edward's embrace of a French-derived chivalric culture and claim to the French throne tended to link the nobility to both countries, who exchanged hostages and diplomatic missions, while at the same time the battles provided the focus for anti-French sentiment and for renewed claims for English as a valued national language. Despite considerable early success in the war, meanwhile, England's French holdings dwindled almost to nothing by the time of Edward III's death, and his continuing demand for funds to pursue his military projects put considerable strain on the economy.

This economy was already heavily impacted by the plague of 1348-1349, the “Black Death”, which had a lasting impact on the demography, the economy, and ultimately the culture of Britain and Europe generally. It is believed that roughly one-third of western Europe’s population died of the plague. In its wake, there were severe labour shortages, and these facilitated a certain amount of social mobility as people were able to take higher-paying work.

Some employers competed for scarce labour by improving wages, but the Statute of Labourers of 1351 officially restricted both wages and labour mobility. This became a source of long-standing friction between the working population of England and its rulers. Some of that tension found violent expression early in the reign of Edward III’s grandson, Richard II (r. 1377-1399), who came to the throne when he was only ten. Severe taxation and limits on wages caused considerable distress among the general populace, and helped to spark the Rising of 1381, in which groups from all over the country challenged the legislative and fiscal policies of the nobility, although they declared their allegiance to Richard. A major conflict between Richard and his nobles (particularly his uncles) was Richard’s desire to make peace with France. Later in his reign he became increasingly despotic and he was eventually deposed by Henry Bolingbroke (who became Henry IV), the son of his uncle John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster.

The Black Death, or bubonic plague, is still around. In July 2013, part of the Angeles National Forest was evacuated when a squirrel tested positive. Luckily, fleas are not common in urban areas and the plague can be treated today with antibiotics.

Fifteenth-Century Transitions

As the “usurper” Henry IV tried to solidify his claims to the throne, religious legitimacy was also at issue. During the reign of Richard, current church practices were challenged by groups of dissenters called Lollards or Wycliffites. In the early fifteenth century, there was a tremendous reaction against them; “heretics” were burnt at the stake and the production of Bibles in English was banned.

Tensions became so acute that there was even a short-lived rebellion led by Sir John Oldcastle in 1413, in which he and other Londoners tried to depose the new King Henry V. The fact that Oldcastle had at this time already been convicted of heresy (as a Lollard) solidified the link many secular and church lords made between religious and worldly sedition. While Henry’s military success in France—most famously at the battle of Agincourt in 1415—and his strength as a ruler eased some of the strain, anxiety about the monarchy’s legitimacy and about composition in the vernacular are evident in much of the literary production of the century. As a consequence there was also an outpouring of carefully orthodox religious literature, often from new monastic institutions with royal patronage. When Henry VI came to the throne in 1411, his own devout tendencies reinforced the link between the Lancastrian court and monastic spirituality.

John Wycliff (1320-1384) was an Oxford theologian whose views brought him into conflict with the Church. He was responsible to the first major attempt to translate the Bible in English (known as the Wycliffite Bible, it was probably completed near the end of his life). Wycliff’s followers were known as **Lollards**, a term that most likely imitates the mumbling “la la la” sound associated with their preaching.

This emphasis on spiritual experience contrasts sharply in tone with many of the historical events of the later part of the century. The long Hundred Years War was effectively over by 1153,

when the English lost Gascony, their last major territory in France. Two years later, the conflict known as the **Wars of the Roses** erupted in England, so called because the emblems of the houses of Lancaster and York were the red and white roses. The king, Henry VI, was a descendant of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, but his right to rule was challenged by Richard of York, a descendant of John's brother Edmund, Duke of York. This led to an ongoing dispute between the Lancastrian and Yorkist factions. Control of the crown switched several times between 1460 and 1485, culminating in the defeat of the Yorkist Richard III by the Lancastrian Henry Tudor (who became Henry VII). Henry's victory brought an end to the Plantagenet monarchy and the rise of the Tudor dynasty.

In 1476 **William Caxton** opened a print shop in London and until his death in 1491 published almost a hundred works, many of them his own translations. His attention to the ever-growing market for vernacular literature and his admiration for the great authors of the past made his professional life one of the great shaping forces on the development of the British tradition, as well as the instrument of England's entry into the world of printed books. Although the impact of the printing press would not be significant until the sixteenth century, like rise of the Tudor dynasty, it would help usher in the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern world.

Yes, the conflict between the houses of Lancaster and York is the source of the conflict between the houses of Lannister and Stark in *Game of Thrones*. If you are wondering how *Game of Thrones* is going to turn out, I will only say that Henry was Welsh on his father's side, and the symbol of Wales is the red dragon.

The English Language in the Middle Ages

When the Angles and Saxons came to Britain, their Germanic dialects quickly became sundered from those of their cousins on the continent. The development of these dialects in Britain is **Old English** (which used to be called Anglo-Saxon). The Old English linguistic period dates from roughly 500-1100. Whilst Old English was spoken earlier, the earliest records written of Old English date to about 700, when the Anglo-Saxons had converted to Christianity, and were certainly a response to Christian literate culture. Germanic runes, intended for carving, were unsuitable for books and other long documents, so the Anglo-Saxons adopted Latin letter forms, often as they were written by Irish missionaries. In some cases, they had to invent letters to represent sounds not present in Latin. Examples are the *thorn* (*þ*) and *eth* (*ð*), which were used (interchangeably) for the "th" sounds in "thin" and "this"; and the *aesc* (*æ*), pronounced "ash", which represented the "a" sound in that word.



A 50 pence coin minted in 2005 quotes definitions from Samuel Johnson's Dictionary (1755). The "Saxon" word "Fifteen" is given using the distinct **Insular** letter forms of written Old English. The *ƿ*, or **yogh**, which was used for both "g" and "y" sounds, is based on the Irish form of "g". It was written **3** in the later Middle Ages.

Christianity also brought loanwords to the English language. As you can imagine, many of them were related to religion, such as *church* (Old English *cirice*) and *mass* (Old English *mæsse*), but words were borrowed in a variety of social domains.

Old English had a number of dialects, which scholars have been able to map roughly onto the major political kingdoms—Northumbrian, Mercian, and West Saxon—though there were others, and certainly sub-dialects that did not correspond to political boundaries. Initially, Anglo-Saxon scribes tended to write in the dialects of their native region. An exception appears to be poetry, which almost invariably shows linguistic forms from multiple dialects. In some cases, this may have been because the poem moved between dialect regions and was partially “translated”, but it also appears that there developed a common poetic language, or *koine* (a Greek term, since ancient Greek poetry demonstrates a similar phenomenon). The collapse of the Northumbrian kingdom, followed by King Alfred’s educational efforts, and then the Benedictine Reform brought a gradual tendency for writers throughout England to adopt the West Saxon dialect. By the early eleventh century, the dialect of Winchester, the capital of Wessex, was used as a standard. The waves of Scandinavian settlement in the north and east of England also led to substantial influence on English from **Old Norse**. There is, however, very little evidence for this influence surviving from before the Norman Conquest. This is a testament to the strength of the education system in late Anglo-Saxon England, which appears to have taught writers to avoid vocabulary of Norse origin.

The reasons for this probably go beyond the ethnic politics of the day. Old English literary culture was extremely conservative in general. In many ways, it was more in touch with the culture of oral composition and transmission which had preceded the production of written texts. The Old English poetic *koine* preserved a great deal of vocabulary which pre-dated the Anglo-Saxons’ arrival in Britain and was not in everyday use. Anglo-Saxon poets continued to use this vocabulary long after they began composing in writing. At the end of the period, Old English underwent some very profound sound changes, but scribes continued to use spellings (sometimes making mistakes) that more closely resemble the pronunciation of a century before. Only with the collapse of formal training in the reading and writing of Old English would scribes begin to attempt to represent current pronunciation on the page.

The Norman Conquest was the largest factor in bringing about the collapse of Old English literacy. The Anglo-Saxon aristocracy was replaced by one that spoke Anglo-Norman French, removing an important source of patronage for literature in English. As French speakers entered the ranks of the English clergy, literacy in English gradually waned. For a generation, there was an active effort to copy English laws, homilies, and other texts, but the effort turned to translation into Anglo-Norman French and Latin around the second quarter of the twelfth century. Almost no new literature in English survives until c. 1200.

The surviving documents of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries are sometimes described as “transitional” between Old English and **Middle English** (1100-1500). Scribes made attempts to copy the linguistic forms they found in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, but, increasingly, forms characteristic of Middle English begin to appear. These include Scandinavian loanwords suppressed during the Anglo-Saxon period, and, more importantly, growing numbers of loanwords from Anglo-Norman French.

Grammatical between Old and Middle English are particularly noticeable. Old English is characterised by a system of grammatical inflections, suffixes that indicated the roles the words played in a sentence. For example, a word like *stan* “stone”, would be *stanes* if it was possessive, *stane* if it was the object of a preposition, *stanas* “stones” if it was plural, *stana* if it was both possessive and plural, and *stanum* if it was both plural and the object of a preposition. At the end of

the Old English period, the sounds *a* and *u* in the second syllables of these words became *e*. Hence *stanas* became *stanes*, and *stanum* became *stanen* or *stane* (final *-m* changed to *-n*, and the North final *-n* disappeared as well). As you can see from these examples, the extensive sound changes disrupted the grammatical system, as it was no longer possible to identify grammatical role based on the inflection. Increasingly, meaning had to be conveyed through word order, and there was a tendency to re-organise the grammatical forms. Hence, in some dialects, the forms of *stan* would include *stanes* (possessive singular), *stane* (singular object of preposition), and *stanes* for all the plural forms. Whilst Middle English retained a richer inflectional system than Modern English, in this example we can see forms very close to the ones we use today.

One of the more striking grammatical changes was the development of the Old English third person pronouns: *he* “he”, *heo* “she”, and *hi* “they”. In the late Old English period, *eo* came to be pronounced *e*, meaning that there was no means of distinguishing “he” from “she”! By the same sound change described above, the word for “their”, *hira*, merged with the word for “her”, *hire*. The resulting confusion led to the creation of a variety of new pronouns in different dialects. The ones that stuck with us, “she” and “they”, first appear in the former Danelaw region and are clearly the influence of Old Norse. The words “their” and “them” would not be adopted in the Middle English of London until c. 1400!

Middle English also came to have a different “look” from Old English because of changing scribal practices. In some cases, these were superficial. The Old English word *hwæt* (the famous first word of *Beowulf*) came to be spelt “what” (which is what it means). Although there was a small change in the pronunciation of *æ* to *a*, the beginning of the word was pronounced exactly the same. In some cases, scribes, accustomed to writing in French adopted French spellings for English sounds. For example, the Old English word *þu* came to be spelt *þou* without any change in pronunciation (think *parlez-vous Français?*). Change the thorn to the modern “th”, and you can see the modern spelling “thou”.

As in the early Old English period, scribes tended to write in their own dialects, and in fact, Middle English demonstrates a bewildering variety of dialect and scribal features. In some cases, these can be truly mind-boggling. The *Middle English Dictionary* lists 183 spellings of the word “though”! Only towards the turn of the fifteenth century was there any degree of standardisation. Migration to London from the North and Central Midlands brought many northerly linguistic forms (including the words “their” and “them”) to the South. The resulting dialect mixture tended to be codified in the practices of the increasingly bureaucratic Chancery. However, when Caxton began to print English texts towards the end of the 1400s he expressed his despair at choosing which forms of the language to commit to the press. Nevertheless, choose he did, adopting a variety of forms reflecting the usage in London from preceding century. With a few modifications, the spellings chosen by Caxton and his followers were adopted by writers in the early modern period, even as their own language was undergoing changes on par with those that had occurred in the eleventh century. As a result, the spelling system we use today very closely resembles that of late Middle English, even though our pronunciation is very different. This can mean reading Middle English is a challenge. The familiar spellings can disrupt your ability to pronounce Middle English as it was meant to be read.

Another challenge to be aware of is the so-called “false friend”. Words change their meaning over time, and sometimes they will mean something very different from what you imagine. A good example is the word *buxom* (Old English *buhsum*, “prone to bowing”). Throughout the medieval period, it meant “obedient”, particularly obedient to God. If you read it with the modern meaning,

you are going to come up with a truly bizarre interpretation of the text. How do you avoid being deceived by false friends? Your true friend is the historical dictionary. This is a dictionary that provides quotations of actual usage next to definitions *with* the dates of those quotations. That way you can tell what meanings were current at any given time. Two dictionaries will be useful for this course: the [Middle English Dictionary](#) and the [Oxford English Dictionary](#) (the latter requires login access through Oviatt Library). If you look up a word in one of these dictionaries, you will often find that it quotes the very passage that prompted you to look up the word!

The History of Medieval Literature: A (Very Brief) Overview

In the Middle Ages, many writers insisted that all literature had a didactic purpose. It was meant to teach us something, not just to entertain us. For instance, Chaucer's Nunn's Priest quotes Scripture to this effect: "For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is, / To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis; / Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille" (3441-3443). Modern scholars take a broader view but tend to agree that literature is not merely to entertain, in part because that makes it diverting, but essentially meaningless, thus shutting down the conversation. We can say a lot more if we assume that literature serves some social purpose. Before Christianity, the Anglo-Saxons already had sophisticated narrative and poetic traditions composed and transmitted orally. The social purpose these unwritten texts served tended to emphasize the preservation of history, knowledge and wisdom, and the praise of notable members of society (who supported poets). We of course know little of the tales and poems they produced except those that survived to be written down by Christian writers, but one of the best-preserved traditions appears to have been a genre of heroic poetry. The poetic techniques employed developed even before Germanic their ancestors left the continent and appear to have effectively preserved very early stories and poetic language. *Beowulf*, the only surviving copy of which dates to about the year 1000, has been conjectured to have been composed in whole or in part as much as 400 years before it was ever written down.

Oral composition and transmission required incredibly feats of memory, but the early poets relied on the use of formulas, short phrases which could be memorised and then combined in different patterns to build a much larger text. The poetic system was structured to reinforce this method of composition. Each line of poetry was composed of two half-lines, which were in turn linked together by alliteration. **Alliteration** is the repetition of the first sound (not letter, since these poems were not written) of a word. Poets memorised formulaic half-lines and combined them based on the alliteration. Since, in any given circumstance, a poet might need a word to alliterate on a different sound to complete the line, there developed a poetic vocabulary consisting of many synonyms beginning with different sounds. Sometimes these terms were archaic words no longer in use. Sometimes they were compound words or phrases. The most metaphoric of phrases, called *kennings*, have a riddle-like quality. These words and phrases tended to be preserved and re-used over time, giving rise to the poetic vocabulary, or *koine*, described earlier.

Examples of Old English Poetic Language

Synonyms for "man" (Old English *mann*): *secg, rinc, eorl, beorn, fir*

Compound and phrases equivalent to "lord" (Old English *hlaford*):
goldwine "gold-friend", *beaga gyfa* "ring-giver"

Kennings: *hwales rad* "whale's road" (the sea), *banhus* "bone-house" (the body)

One result of this system is that the Anglo-Saxon aesthetic tended to favour a combination of repetition and variation. Under Christian influence, this tradition was adapted to Christian subject matter, creating a fascinating hybrid form of poetry that often combined dense religious and spiritual introspection with the thought-world of the aristocratic *comitatus*. Its authors, however, tended to be clergy, who either composed in written form or committed poetry, old and new, to writing.

The development of a Christian literary tradition in English opened up the language for use in many domains typically reserved for Latin. Histories, laws, medical texts, philosophy, and theology all survive in Old English literature. Saints' lives, a popular genre throughout the Middle Ages, were written, mostly during the period of the Benedictine Reform. The use of English was particularly appropriate for homilies (sermons) which survive in greater numbers than almost any genre.

After the Norman Conquest, earlier texts (especially laws and homilies) were copied for a century or so, but they were clearly becoming increasingly hard to read. It is a matter of some debate how much of the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition survived the Conquest. Although one of the earliest Middle English poets, **Lazamon**, attempted to evoke the flavour of Old English poetry, his work shows only some resemblances to it. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a poetic movement known today as the **Alliterative Revival** used alliteration and poetic language which can be traced back to Old English. The most that can be said about this three hundred year time frame is that the Old English alliterative tradition returned to its oral roots and survived amongst the general populace at a time when most of the country's elite spoke French. By the time it re-emerged, it was profoundly transformed.

When writers began to take up English as a literary language in the thirteenth century, they did so against the backdrop of multilingual literary developments. The West Midlands, which had preserved an English literary tradition the longest, was also a region in which many of these literary currents came together. Lazamon, a Worcestershire priest, wrote *Brut*, a chronicle of the kings of Britain which he translated from the Norman poet Wace's *Roman de Brut* (c. 1155). Wace in turn, had translated his *Roman* from Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin *History of the Kings of Britain* (c. 1136). Geoffrey's *History* offers an account of the realm going back to its mythical Trojan founder, Brutus, and provided a foundation for the Arthurian stories of the later Middle Ages. It became the accepted history of Britain and was much used by the rulers of England for political purposes.

Henry II claimed to have discovered the tomb of King Arthur at Glastonbury Abbey.

Edward I quoted King Arthur's conquest of the Scots in the *Brut* history as justification for English sovereignty over Scotland.

Edward III actually tried to recreate the Order of the Round Table for his knights before budget cuts forced him to establish the smaller Order of the Garter.

Not far from Lazamon's home there appears to have been an attempt to create a new, modern literary language for English. Dubbed "the AB language" by J.R.R. Tolkien, it includes the *Ancrene Riwe* and other devotional works, as well as a group of female saints' lives. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that women formed an important early audience for vernacular texts (one of the earliest works in Anglo-Norman French is to be found in the St Albans Psalter, designed for Christina of Markyate). The **South English Legendary**, a collection of saints' lives which was to prove the most popular text in medieval England, was also produced originally in the West Midlands.

The developments above can be seen to come together in the work of Geffrei Gaimar, a Norman poet who entered the service of Constance Fitzgilbert in the 1130s. Constance married an Anglo-Norman nobleman and moved to Norfolk, bringing Gaimar with her. She encouraged him to write a history of Britain from the earliest times through the Norman Conquest. Gaimar's history of the Britons has not survived, eclipsed by Wace's *Roman de Brut*, but his *Estoire des Engleis* (c. 1138) continues where the *Brut* history leaves off. Most of it is a translation of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* into Anglo-Norman French, but a crucial transitional passage tells a local legend of **Havelok the Dane**. Here we see Normans use of history and literature to embed themselves within the local English landscape, as well as something of the interest women took in literature during this period.

The purely secular context of *Estoire des Engleis* also highlights the growth of new forms of literature specifically for the aristocracy. By the 1180s, this tale had been converted to a new genre called the Breton lay in the form of the *Lai d'Haveloc*. Recall that the Anglo-Saxons had driven a large number of Britons into exile into what became Brittany. Their descendants preserved a great deal of Celtic folklore, and by the twelfth century, the tales ("lays") told by Breton minstrels were very popular throughout France. In England, a French immigrant called Marie de France practically invented the **Breton lay** as a literary genre in the 1180s. Her lays, all written in French, was translated into nearly every European language by the end of the Middle Ages. On the continent, lays about King Arthur were particularly important. A series of Arthurian romances were composed by Chrétien de Troyes (c. 1150-1190), and these form the basis for most modern stories about King Arthur.

The **romance** became the standard form of aristocratic literature for the next two centuries. The word "romance" comes from medieval French *romanz* "Roman", which actually (or perversely) referred to French (or Spanish in Spain and Italian in Italy), rather than Latin. The term came to be used for a tale in the vernacular (cf. Wace's *Roman de Brut* "Romance of Brutus", which was a translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin. Eventually it came to refer to the particular tales of knightly exploits that were popular amongst the twelfth-century aristocracy. Initially, romances were written in verse, but towards the end of the thirteenth century romances in prose were composed in France.

The term "romance" should *never* be capitalised, except in titles or at the beginning of a sentence. When referring to medieval literature don't use the terms "romantic" and "Romantic". The former refers to romance in the modern sense relating to affairs of love (a sense that developed in the nineteenth century). "Romantic" refers to a literary and cultural movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although both have origins in associations with the content of medieval romances, they do not refer today to the medieval literary genre. When discussing medieval romances, call them "*romance literature*", not "romantic literature".

The first romances in English also appear at the end of thirteenth century, and initially only in verse (the first prose romances in English do not appear until the fifteenth century). By this time, the audience for romance had grown, and members of the mercantile classes (who were growing increasingly literate) were taking an interest in the genre. English poets were inventive with romances, composing them in a variety of different verse forms. What they have in common is that, to varying degrees, they employ **rhyme**, a technique that was almost completely absent during the Anglo-Saxon period. Alliteration was still employed, but more often for decorative purposes than to structure the verse. No doubt the influence of French poetic traditions was a major factor in the adoption of this new poetic device.

Romances fell out of favour in the modern period until there was an attempt to revive them in a new, or “novel”, way. That’s where the term “novel” comes from. But it is interesting to note that in French the same word *roman* is used for both a medieval romance and a modern novel.

Religious and devotional literature continued to be written in the fourteenth century, now increasingly in English. In the second half of the fourteenth century, there was a concerted effort to import French and Italian literary conventions, or even to create a native tradition that could stand alongside them. The late fourteenth century also sees the first records of dramatic performances, probably original derived from liturgical pageants. These “morality plays” or “mystery plays”, as they are called, were performed in city streets, rather than in theatres. Most of the plays to survive in writing date to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Lyric poetry, generally short, non-narrative poems, the forms of which often have their origins in music and dance (at least during the Middle English period) were produced throughout the Middle Ages, some in religious and some in secular contexts. Lyric poems, and the literary forms discussed above bear the most resemblance to the texts typically studied in modern English classes, but it must be remembered that there was a continuous outpouring of historical, legal, documentary, scientific, and theological writing. Medieval audiences and writers often did not observe (in fact, were not even aware of) the strict genre distinctions that inform our own reading writing, so it is important to read this material alongside texts which might have a more modern appeal.

The social and political environment of the late fourteenth century coincided with a tremendous outpouring of artistic and cultural production. Later medieval literature participates, often deliberately, in the project of making English a literary language considered worthy of taking its place alongside Latin and the illustrious continental vernaculars. (It may seem strange now, but a view that English was inadequate for theological, scientific, and poetic expression was a norm that would persist well into the modern period.) The period gave rise to the big four “Ricardian” poets (poets of the reign of Richard II): Geoffrey Chaucer, the *Gawain*-Poet (author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, also called the *Pearl*-Poet), John Gower, and William Langland. The tendency of these writers to attract so much attention in modern university curricula has caused them to overshadow their debts to, and continuity with, the century that preceded them.