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CHAPTER ONE: THE LITERATURE OF MEDIEVAL ENGLAND (450-1500)

The term "medieval" or "Middle Ages" was first used by sixteenth century Renaissance scholars who saw the period as a rather dismal one compared with the progress made in classical antiquity and the advance of knowledge in their own time. The period 450 – 1000 has been called the "Dark Ages", the term "Middle Ages" then being reserved for the period 1000-1500.

1. Pre-Medieval England

England was inhabited from about 3000 BC; the builders of Stonehenge were excellent astronomers, had extraordinary engineering skills and a complex social organisation. Celtic tribes invaded England around 700 BC, their bronze weapons ensuring their victory over the previous settlers. The next invaders were the Romans. They arrived in 43 AD and stayed for 400 years. They drove the Celts or Britons into Scotland and Wales and created an urban civilisation; they built towns, roads, and developed trade. When the Roman Empire began to come under attack from migrating Asian tribes, the English colony was abandoned.

2. Anglo-Saxon England (450-1066)

After the departure of the Romans, tribes from Germany called the Angles and Saxons began to invade the now disorganised country. The name "English" is derived from the first group. Many of the Celts or Britons fled from the massacres to Brittany (in present- day France), which was named after them. The newcomers established several kingdoms, which were organised on a tribal basis: that is to say, the free people held the land in common; life was mainly agricultural, herds of cattle constituted the main source of wealth, apart from plunder. The warriors held a special position under the kings, whose crown depended on military force; prisoners of war were enslaved.

From about 800 on Danish or Viking invaders began to plunder Ireland and France, and to invade northern and eastern England, attracted by the rich monasteries. They gradually founded permanent settlements, building fortified towns from which they traded. Under this threat to their rule, the Anglo-Saxon kings began to unite. In the reign of King Alfred the Great (849-899), the Danes controlled nearly half of the country. He paid them huge sums of money (the "Danegeld") until he had won over the Anglo- Saxon rulers, and had learnt enough from the Danes to defeat them.

The English adopted the Viking iron axes which made it easier to cut down forests, winning land to use for agriculture. The rulers began to build stone castles; towns grew up close to them because of the trade which the lord attracted. With the beginning of centralised rule under the most powerful Anglo-Saxon kings, the status of the people began to change: in return for protection from the Vikings, they had to give up many of their freedoms, and were becoming increasingly dependent on their lords. Tribal Anglo-Saxon England began to develop into a feudal society under the pressure of the wars against the Norsemen.

2.1. Anglo-Saxon literature

The language spoken by the people was a Germanic dialect which we call Old English. Anglo-Saxon culture was mainly oral; poets entertained the kings, warriors and their families with tales of the ancestors' adventures and heroic deeds. Only a fraction has survived: about 30,000 lines of poetry in four manuscript collections. There are also collections of laws, historical works, and translations from Greek and Latin into English.

2.1.1. *Monks introducing writing*

In 597, St Augustine was sent from Rome to preach to the pagans of southern England; Irish missionaries began to work in the northern areas. The priests were the only literate people in the country; their organisation was a European one, and they brought with them its international language, Latin, at the same time creating a large new vocabulary in English for church matters; they introduced agricultural, engineering and medical skills as well as philosophical learning of the now vanished civilisations of Greece and Rome. They founded monasteries which became centres of education. They wrote and copied books, built in stone, developed crafts, traded – and took taxes. The rulers of these monasteries, the abbots, and the bishops soon occupied a position at the top of the social pyramid. They wrote down the laws of the kingdom they lived in so as to record their rights and privileges. But the art of writing was also used to record pagan literature given a Christian veneer.

2.1.2. Beowulf

The greatest literary work that has survived is an epic poem of about 3000 lines called

Beowulf. It was probably composed in the eighth century and written down some 300 years later. It is the story of the heroic deeds of Germanic warriors in the fifth and sixth centuries. The hero comes to the court of a Danish king and frees him from a terrible monster called Grendel, and then from Grendel's mother, an even more ferocious beast. The second half deals with Beowulf's old age, when he is king and must defend his country against a fearsome dragon, which he manages to destroy, but dies in the process. Alliteration is the basis of the verse: having a clear pattern of words beginning with the same sound was a great help for memorising, a vital consideration in communities where books were rare treasures.


2.2. BEOWULF MANUSCRIPT WITH MONSTER

Stories about monsters, horror and magic have remained popular to this day, but the perilous quality of life in those times must have made them seem quite realistic. Most of the country was covered by dense forest and inhabited by wild animals; the only light people had in the long winter evenings came from flickering wick lamps; the evils of disease, malnutrition and war accompanied their short lives. The tales would have been popular with people of all ranks and ages and would have been told at village fairs by local storytellers as well as in the household of the kings by wandering *scops* or poets.

The Beowulf manuscript was discovered by a seventeenth century scholar; it was nearly destroyed in a fire a hundred years later; today it is safely housed in the British Museum.

2.1.3. Religious and historical writing

There are important prose documents dating from the Anglo-Saxon period. A monk called THE VENERABLE BEDE (673-735) compiled *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. It was written in Latin, and translated into English by King Alfred over a hundred years later. It gives a fascinating account of Bede's time, in which miracles and legends have their place next to battles, the death of a king, or the founding of a monastery. The scholar of the period is KING ALFRED THE GREAT (ca. 849-899). He was so appalled by the decline of learning after the Viking destruction of monasteries that he learnt Greek and Latin as a middle-aged man in order to translate important works into English, often adding passages of his own to explain or comment. He hoped to
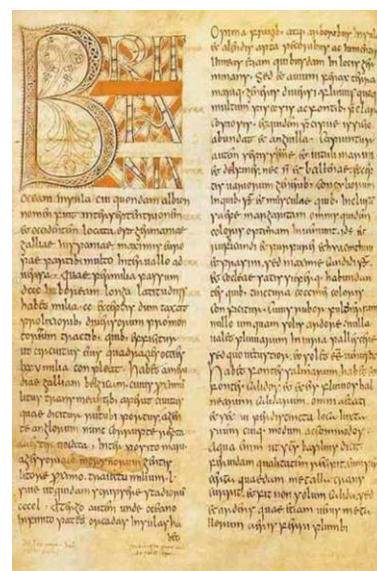
(2) PAGE FROM BEDE'S ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY

make the freeborn youths of England literate in their own language. Such an interest in culture was rare indeed in a military man. He drew up laws for his kingdom. He commissioned the monasteries to keep records: the monks compiled a prose work known as *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which is a sort of national history, recording important events, the lives of famous abbots as well as storms, fires, famines and invasions.

Anglo-Saxon culture was greatly enriched through its assimilation of Christianity. The churchmen were the main writers of literature, sometimes recording the works produced by lay people. There was narrative verse, which is either heroic or religious in nature, as well as religious, historical and legal prose.

3.The Norman Conquest of England (1066)

In 1066, King Edward the Confessor died, he was an Anglo-Saxon with Norman-French relatives. William Duke of Normandy claimed the throne, invaded England and within four years established his rule all over the country, maintaining it through his barons. The Normans (Norsemen) had first come to northern France as pirates and then settled there. William was a skilled administrator, who imposed a unified form of feudalism on England and Wales. Within twenty years of the conquest, his officials conducted an inquiry into the wealth of the country in order to have an accurate basis for tax assessment. *The Domesday Book* was completed in 1086, and tells us who owned what in every district. (The Old English word *dome* or *doom* meant law or judgement; hence it came to mean fate or ruin). The survey shows that most of the land was held by Normans: one fifth by the king, one quarter by the church, the rest by

out 200 barons. About 10% of the people were slaves, 70% serfs, and 10% freemen. The population of England would not have exceeded two million.

William established a central administration in order to keep the political power of his barons in check. He imposed a unified legal system, the common law; the tax collectors, the shire reeves (sheriffs) were checked and, if found to be corrupt, sacked. Relations between the crown and church were complex. The great churchmen were subject to the king as landholders; they also represented the European power of the papacy and had enormous influence over the king's subjects due to their claim to be God's representatives on earth. Conflict often arose between church and crown; in England it was settled by compromise.

3.1. Middle English Literature

3.1.1. Literature in French

For two hundred years after the Norman conquest of England, French was the language of the rulers, the powerful, the refined; Latin that of the clergy and scholars; English the language of the servants and serfs. English gradually became simplified and lost most of its inflections. This phase is known as **Middle English.** The literary art which has been preserved of the Norman period was written in French; it was courtly in nature, not heroic. It was not intended for a warrior audience as in Anglo-Saxon days, but for a refined Christian aristocratic society in which women played an important role, with a sophisticated cult of chivalry. There were love songs ("chansons courtoises") and romances or fantastic tales of the adventures of chivalrous knights. The source of much of this courtly romantic literature was *History of the Kings of Britain* written in Latin in the early twelfth

(3) KING ARTHUR AND HIS KNIGHTS FROM AN ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPT

century by the Welshman GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH (ca.1100-ca.1155) recording the Celtic legends of King Arthur.

3.1.2. Religious Literature in English
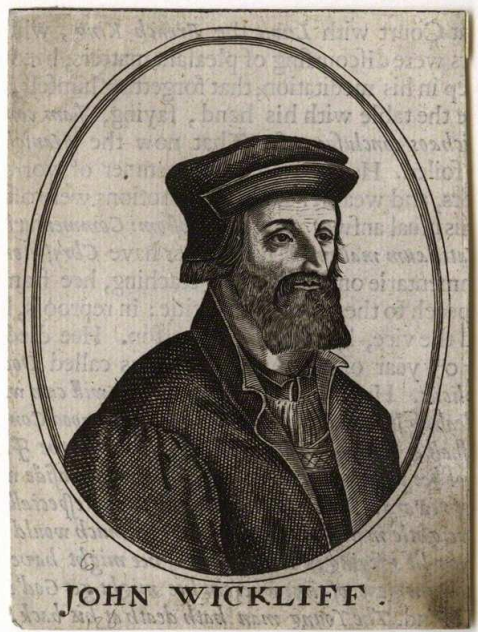
(4) JOHN WYCLIFFE. FICTITIOUS PORTRAIT

The loss of Normandy in 1204 encouraged the nobles to stay in England and to learn English. By 1300 English was used by all classes, having been greatly enriched by the huge number of French words imported into the language by the new users. Writing in English flourished from this time, a great deal of which has been preserved. There were love poems which were personal in nature and not conventionally stereotyped as the courtly French songs of the previous period had been.

There was much religious poetry, often also personally expressive, as it was part of the great movement of religious enthusiasm and reform which had led to the founding of many new orders.

In 1395, the whole bible was translated into English by JOHN WYCLIFFE (1320-84) and his followers. He was a clergyman who lost his post at Oxford for his radical criticism of the wealth of the church.

Medieval religious literature also appeared in dramatic form. Mystery Plays were very popular from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries. The famous *Oberammergau Passion Play* is one of that genre. Their themes were biblical; they were performed on movable stages in the towns. Their purpose was to edify and teach the illiterate people; they also entertained through the spectacle itself and the tricks and dialogues of the devil. The Morality Plays arose in the fourteenth century and were sermons in dramatic

form about the lifestyle of the good Christian. The best known is the anonymous fifteenth century *Everyman*. A messenger orders the main character with the allegoric name to set out on a long journey: he unwillingly obeys. None of Everyman's friends such as Worldly Goods will accompany him; only Good Deeds is willing to go with him, but he has not had much to do with that person during his life. These are allegories or parables about the human condition: virtues and vices are personified; the characters and the story teach a moral lesson.

(5) EVERYMAN AND DEATH

3.1.3. Langland's *Piers Plowman*

A radical criticism of society is to be found in the famous allegorical poem: *The Vision of Piers the Plowman* by WILLIAM LANGLAND (1330?-1400?). The first version was written around 1360, the third in 1390; he does not use the fashionable French courtly genre, but the alliterative verse form of Old English literature. Fifty manuscripts have survived, which indicate its popularity. The poet reviews the problems of his time in allegoric form: vices and virtues appear as characters in the story.

(6) THE POET OF
"PIERS PLOWMAN" DREAMING

3.1.4. GEOFFREY CHAUCER (1345?-1400)

(7) GEOFFREY CHAUCER IN HOCCLEVE'S "REGIMENT"

Chaucer is the greatest writer of the period. He was the son of a wealthy London wine merchant; he became a page in a noble household, and later a high official in the royal service. He travelled widely in Europe negotiating financial treaties for the crown, and thus became acquainted with the works of Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch. As an educated Englishman, he knew and loved French literature and as much of classical culture as was known in his time. It was his cosmopolitan European orientation which made him into one of the most original of English writers.

He wrote in the French courtly style (the allegorical romance *The Romaunt of the Rose*; then he came under the influence of Dante and Boccaccio, producing the masterpiece *Troylus and Cryseyde* (ca. 1380). He borrowed freely from his Italian source, this was standard medieval practice.

The Canterbury Tales of 1386, the most famous of Chaucer's works, is a collection of stories told by 31 pilgrims resting in a tavern on their way to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket, the archbishop murdered in 1170 in Canterbury cathedral by the Norman king Henry II.

The characters are introduced in the Prologue: they nearly all come from the middle ranks: professional men such as a doctor, lawyer, an official; a merchant, a sailor; there are craftsmen, servants, a woman who has outlived five husbands; a nun, priests

(8) CHAUCER'S CANTERBURY TALES
THE PILGRIMS AT TABLE

and monks. They are further characterised by their stories, so that we get a panorama of medieval life as well as a survey of popular literary genres: fables, classical legends, lives of the saints, tales of chivalrous adventure as well as of decidedly unchivalrous erotic exploits. Most of the tales have a continental source, but through the framework in which they are placed they are woven together, each tale commenting ironically on its predecessor and contributing a further facet to the complex and sophisticated whole. Chaucer's work consists of 23 tales written in verse.

(9) CANTERBURY TALES. FIRST PAGE OF THE KNIGHT'S TALE