

OE Literature

(6th cent. – 1066)

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THE GERMANIC CONQUEST OF BRITAIN

- a. In the 5th, 6th cent. after the decline of the Roman Empire the Jutes, the Saxons, and the Angles invaded and settled in Britain. They came from Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, and northern Germany).
- b. The Celts, who were Christianized by the Romans, had been driven to remote areas of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. Missionaries came from these places to Christianize the Anglo-Saxons in the 6th cent. (Christianized in the 7th, 8th cent. from pagan to Christian).
- c. In the 7th and 8th cent. England was divided into kingdoms: Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Kent, Essex, Sussex, and Wessex. These kingdoms were united, because of Viking raids, the capital was Winchester.

2. THE CULTURE, INCLUDING THE LANGUAGE, AND CIVILISATION OF THE OLD ENGLISH PERIOD

- a. The OE dialect became standardized with the Wessex dialect – King’s English. The Wessex dialect was standardized as the Anglo-Saxon dialect.
- b. Literature is the mixture of pagan and Christian belief.
- c. The Wessex dialect had many inflections, case endings, conjugations, gender forms... The spelling and the pronunciation did not differ.
- d. The main approach in the OE literature is the allegorical approach – metaphors were used.
- e. The literature abounds in the images of evil/darkness vs. goodness/light – Bipolar view – order vs. chaos (lawless pagan society and Christianity), apocalyptic view.
- f. The literature was primarily oral, later shorter text were hammered out in stones (inscriptions) – rune alphabet. At the time the first manuscripts appeared.
- g. The characterization by the feudal society is reflected in literature.
- h. The social, hierarchical pyramid: 1. the king, 2. vassals, 3. subjects.
- i. Several important features were highly valued: loyalty, courage, heroism, preparedness to die for king and country.
- j. Main literary genres: religious poetry and heroic epic, semi-religious poetry, lyrical (secular) poetry, sermons, annals (historical works).
- k. Prior to 1066 the situation was bilingual: OE vernacular, Latin.
- l. Monasteries were established and made centers of cultural activities (Winchester, York).

3. KING ALFRED AND HIS LITERARY PROGRAMME

- a. He established the language – King’s English.
- b. He had a programme of changing the bilingual situation by translating works from Latin into OE and brought many people from Europe to work on translating. The reason was to educate people.
- c. These translations were paraphrases – not literal but very descriptive. The original text in Latin was just a pretext, the translation was a metatext.
- d. Alfred’s first translation was “Pastoral Care” (by Pope Gregory) – in the prefix he writes about the level of learning, availability of OE works, and about the importance of not only religious but also non-religious, secular subjects (liberal education). He introduced the study of liberal arts (artes liberales).
- e. His second translation was “Universal History” (by Orosius) – it is a historical work, encyclopaedia of texts describing the growth of Christianity in England. The tendency was to record how Britain was changed from a pagan to a Christian country.
- f. The third translation was “The Consolation of Philosophy” (by Boethius) – philosophy as a good substitute for man’s existential drama.
- g. The fourth translation was “St Augustine’s Soliloquies” translated as internal monologues – Alfred’s memories.
- h. The fifth translation was “Ecclesiastical History of the English People” (8th cent. by Bede the Venerable) – containing descriptions of historical facts, some also fictional.

4. THE FILM DISCUSSION BASED ON KING ALFRED'S LIFE AS A MILITARY READER

- a. When Alfred became king of the West Saxons in 871, he was already an experienced military leader, as he had participated in several campaigns against the invading Danes. The Danes had been present in the British Isles since at least 789, but until the time of Alfred they had concentrated their efforts on subjugating the eastern lands of Britain. However, in 865 a great army of Danes hungry for land and wealth moved quickly through the kingdoms of East Anglia and Northumbria. After these two kingdoms capitulated and paid tribute to the invaders, the Danes turned to Mercia. There, in 868, they met both Mercians and West Saxons; the two nations had formed an alliance that had been strengthened that very year by the marriage of Alfred and Ealhswith, daughter of a Mercian ealdorman. Alfred and his elder brother King Aethelred personally led the Wessex contingent, yet not even the combined forces of the Mercians and the West Saxons could keep the Danes at bay. The Mercians, like the East Anglians and Northumbrians, had to "make peace" - that is, pay tribute. In 871 Alfred's brother Aethelred died, making Alfred, last son of King Aethelwulf, the new king of the West Saxons. In that year as well the Danes turned their attention to Alfred's kingdom, and for the next four years, until 875, Alfred bought peace for his people by paying tribute to the Danes. At first the invaders seemed satisfied, but in 875 they began altering the terms of the peace. That year, after collecting their tribute, the Danes did not leave Wessex as they had before, but lived there, peacefully but at the expense of the West Saxons, until 878. Then, in their desire to subjugate completely the people of Wessex, the Danes went on the offensive. Alfred fought back, yet in March of that year he and his followers were forced into hiding, and the hope of the West Saxons was fading. But that May Alfred met the Danish force at Edington; "there he fought against the entire host, and put it to flight, and pursued it up to the fortification and laid siege there a fortnight; and then the host gave him preliminary hostages and solemn oaths that they would leave his kingdom, and promised him in addition that their king would receive baptism; and they fulfilled this promise" (After the victory he allowed the Danes to keep their conquests in East Anglia & Mercia provided that Guthrum, their king, was converted to Christianity – "I bow your Gods."). Alfred had defeated the invading Danes, forcing them to submit to his terms. They subsequently left Alfred and Wessex, turning to the continent for new lands to plunder. Yet though this particular force left, Danes still inhabited Britain; Northumbria, East Anglia, and parts of Mercia were all still under the Danelaw. Alfred felt constantly threatened, and had to fight skirmishes with the Danes for many years. To help preserve his hard-earned peace Alfred developed stronger defenses for his land of Wessex. In the southern part of Britain he established several new fortified cities, better than the smaller forts, where great groups of people could gather for protection. He reorganized his army so that at any one time half of it was prepared for war. Finally, in 886, Alfred took the initiative himself and attacked the Danish-held city of London in an attempt to diminish the lands ruled under the Danelaw. He succeeded, and for his efforts all the "Angles and Saxons - those who had formerly been scattered everywhere and were not in captivity with the Danes - turned willingly to King Alfred and submitted themselves to his lordship". At this point Alfred seems to have come closest to rightly earning the title "King of England," though in reality he governed perhaps a quarter of the land now known as England. In 892-3 Alfred's peace was disturbed by the violent return of the Danes. These invaders, driven off the continent, seemed intent upon "the final conquest and settlement of England". His standing army was able to fight off the invaders while the people remained safe in his fortified cities. Alfred also employed new tactics; he scouted out the enemy and destroyed those at sea using larger war-ships of his own design. The Danes were thwarted at every turn, and were forced to retreat, unfulfilled, from the island of Britain.

5. OE PROSE OTHER THAN KING ALFRED'S TRANSLATIONS

6. OE RELIGIOUS POETRY (CAEDMON, CYNEWULF)

- a. Caedmon was a monk. He wrote a short poem "The Hymn" to God. It has nine lines and is a typical religious poem. It uses both pagan and Christian themes. It celebrates God, an earthly lord – he's not a supernatural being but a pagan hero. In the hymn a narrator is the poet himself and is asked to compose a song. He goes to the stable to get an inspiration. He gets a vision about God and returns and tells the poem of grandeur.
- b. Caedmon is also said to be the author of "Genesis"
- c. Cynewulf was also a monk, better in technique than Caedmon. His religious poems are preserved in runes on parchment paper. He wrote Biblical paraphrases, paraphrased stories from the Bible i.e. "The Ascension", "The Fate of the Apostles", "Elene",... Thus also women are brought into literature. He makes references to the classical, Ancient tradition. His poems are complex, meditative, and philosophical.

7. THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

- a. The rood stands for the cross. This poem is of a new genre – a dream vision genre. In this genre, there's always the speaker's dream. The poem is divided into 3 parts:
 - the speaker has a dream, speaks about it. The personified cross talks about itself from the time it was a tree and about carrying Jesus.
 - the cross addresses the speaker, urges him to go around the world to spread the cult of the cross.
 - the speaker wakes up and decides to follow the dream.

The cross becomes an icon, a religious symbol, an icon not necessarily connected to Christianity but as an instrument of finding the meaning of man's life.

8. THE WANDERER, THE SEAFARER (semi-religious poems)

- a. THE WANDERER (an existential, secular poem) - The feudal lord describes his suffering when he wanders the world without aim. He suffers because he's without his king. He is not a believer in God. He totally accepts his fate without desire to change it. He feels lonely, isolated. He has to travel through cold, bad weather.
- b. THE SEAFARER – a long description of life on the sea contrasts the life of the seaman to someone on the land. An important feature is the spirit of adventures, which are symbolical. The seafarer describes his life back in the mainland he doesn't like.
- c. Themes in common:
 - exile (forced, voluntary)
 - isolation (psychical vs. physical)
 - last survivor
 - transience
 - stoicism, faith

9. OE NON-RELIGIOUS, SECULAR POETRY

- a. "Widsith" – speaking about growth in society. It's important to praise good and criticize bad kings, preserve the heroic deeds of a nation. Poems are important for transmitting knowledge from one generation to another.
- b. "The Ruin and the Riddles" – apocalyptic attitude.
- c. "The Wife's Lament" + "The Husbands Message" – she complains about her life in marriage and her role in society – a debate (the songs are complementary).
- d. "The Whale and Fenix" – they represent icons representing transcendence (spiritual presence in nature). Nature is symbolized in animals.
- e. Elegies – to a kind who died, they examine the purpose of man's life; stock metaphor "the sparrow flight"

10. OE HEROIC VERSE, TRADITION

- a. The hero is the main protagonist.
- b. The epic tends to be very narrative and long, there are many events
- c. The Scandinavian tribes brought alliteration to England (an alliterating sound – a stave)
- d. The basic unit was a relatively short verse consisting of varying number of syllables at least one of which was accented. The accents were grammatical. The typical OE verse consisted of two half-lines called heme stiches (half lines with a caesura). The first part was called the ON-verse, the second the OFF-verse. They were linked together by the alliteration.
- e. Heitis were used as substitutions of one noun for another. Instead of saying the spear, they'd say wood or ashes.
- f. Kennings are the descriptive compounds of the heroic verse.

11. BEOWULF – STRUCTURE, REFERENCE TO THEN SOCIAL CONTEXT, CRITICAL APPROACHES, STYLISTIC DEVICES, IMAGERY

- a. Structure:
 - a long narrative poem
 - 3000 lines of verse grouped into 43 “fits”
 - 2 different parts (several authors?)
- b. Reference:
 - The external danger is objectivized in the monster Grendel. It objectivizes the internal weakness of the Danish society. The reasons for destruction are inability to preserve typical feudal relationships, absence of loyalty between Danes is present.
- c. Critics:
 - Describing values i.e. courage, loyalty, fame through heroic deeds, nobility, genealogy.
 - a struggle between the forces of goodness vs. evil – images of light vs. darkness.
 - clash between chaos and reason
 - Beowulf is a pagan hero
- d. Stylistic devices:
 - the sea is referred to as the path of whales, a cough of waves
 - variation in the description repeats the information from the first line in the second line, but no substantial information is added – kenning (seagoer, ring-dispenser). Kennings were adding new, significant information
 - understatement, a description of a person, object by stating its negative, opposite, was frequently used.
- e. Imagery:
 - exchange of light & darkness
 - thesis & antithesis
 - some events, names truly existed
 - the elements of doom, destiny
 - the danger does not lie in the external reality but also in the unity of the kingdom.
- f. Themes:
 - good king
 - goodness prevails
 - blood relationship (fratricide, patricide)
 - revenge, compensation
 - transience of life (Christian addition) – do good in this world and you'll be repaid.

1. THE NORMAN CONQUEST (LANGUAGE, LITERATURE DEVELOPMENT)

- a. The Normans invaded and conquered Britain (they were the aristocracy).
- b. A gradual disappearance of the OE language.
- c. 10% of the population was the Normans, who spoke a particular Norman-French dialect.
- d. Bilingual, bicultural situation – amalgamation of the two in the 12th cent.
- e. The Normans were the superstratum, the Anglo-Saxons were the stratum.
- f. English established itself as a national language and was greatly enriched – there were many words taken from French. Because of great difficulties the Normans simplified the language, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation.
- g. The French influences also resulted in new literary themes – no longer heroic religious themes but medieval themes i.e. courtly love, chivalry, the Church.
- h. England became part of the European tradition.
- i. The new English absorbed not only French but also other Roman language features...
- j. 5 dialects: Northumbrian, Eastmidland (London), Westmidland, Southern Kentish, Northern.
- k. Canterbury becomes the new monastic centre.

2. THE BENEDICTINE REVIVAL (WULFSTAN)

- a. Soon after the Norman Conquest, the Benedictines tried to preserve the OE tradition.
- b. The revival lasted only a short time.
- c. The feudal system was brought to perfection.

3. EUROPEAN INFLUENCES ON ME LITERATURE

- a. The literature seemed to reflect the dilemma between personal feelings and social demands. This clash is often the theme of literary works of that period.
- b. Alliterative line was replaced by syllabic lines (accentual).
- c. Allegorical presentation becomes the main presentation of reality.
- d. The ideal trades of a knight:
 - courtesy
 - generosity
 - courage
 - loyalty
 - piety
- e. Because of the Crusades knights became greedy, materialistic, and violent – chivalry ideal was in decline.
- f. The literature was multilingual – French, Middle English, Latin.

4. ME SCHOLARSHIP

- a. In the High Middle Ages learning developed and was organized into two parts in universities:
 - trivium (grammar, rhetoric, logic)
 - quadrivium (astronomy, music, arithmetic, geometry)
- b. What was of sole importance was how things were presented not their actual content.
- c. All the 3 subjects contributed to articulation and presentation.
- d. Literary originality was of minor importance, since prescribed rules of expression had to be followed.
- e. Everything depended on the art of communication and on the relationship between the reader and the writer.
- f. The writer was aware of the target audience.
- g. Scholastic matters were internationalized.

5. COURTLY LOVE AND ITS INFLUENCE (ROMANTIC LOVE)

- a. The influence came from the southern France and Italy (Boccaccio, Dante)
- b. This ideal was based on a two-fold concept:
 - The medieval knight had to be courageous, able to prove himself in love, gaining a woman by obeying her. This attitude was an idealization. He was in a vassal position.
 - Consummation and sensuality. Adultery was permitted. i.e. Guenever + Lancelot vs. Arthur
- c. Geoffrey Chaucer was the best author who used courtly love in English literature. He is very ironical and critical about this concept. He added that this love is also destructive.
- d. In Victorian period courtly love was trivialized and made fun of.
- e. Courtly love postulated love as the main principle and the main aim. It required discretion.
- f. Marriages were prearranged, there was no freedom for true feelings and the adultery was allowed. Procreation was seen as the main objective.
- g. This concept found the best expression in:
 - complaints
 - dawn songs
 - songs
- h. There were prescribed ways of describing love (codification)- Andreas Capellanus – The Art of Loving

6. ME LITERARY / CRITICAL INTERPRETATION AND THE TECHNIQUES OF WRITING

- a. It was usually carried out on 3 levels:
 - littera – literal level
 - sensus – no metaphirs (meaning)
 - sententia – symbolic, metaphorical interpretation (sentence)
- b. French and Latin authors Ovid, Horace, Cicero, Vergil,... affected the techniques of writing.
- c. Rhetorical aspects are highly valued.
- d. Arranging the material was of high importance. The author with a great deal of authority (auctoritee) was highly valued.
- e. Writers were limited in their treatment of certain subject or theme. They had to follow the rules. They had to use psychologically credible characters, but the plot and its originality were of minor importance.
- f. The story could be begun in two ways:
 - a natural way (chronological order)
 - an artificial way (sophisticated)
- g. A text could begin with a proverb or exemplum, with a fable, “in medias res”, or a flashback could be used.
- h. The material could be arranged in two ways:
 - amplification (a comparison, apostrophe, digression, long description (leaping-and-lingering narration)
 - abbreviation

7. ME LITERARY GENRES

- a. A dream vision – (Roman de la Rose) – The narrator begins the story by complaining about his ability to sleep. Inability to sleep is the framework of the story. Then he falls asleep and wakes up in a dream and has a vision. It usually takes place in spring a garden. There the narrator is taken by a guide to a place where several people are involved in a debate. Then the narrator wakes up and recalls his dream vision, debates about it and travels into the world to tell others about it. It can be of religious and secular nature.
- b. A debate – an exchange of views between two people, animals, or voices (soul & body) – The Owl and the Nightingale.
- c. A beast fable – taken from an animal world and modelled on Aesop’s animal fables (applied to a human world). Fabliaux were very humorous, satirical.
- d. A ballad – a long narrative poem using refrains, dialogues, vernacular language.

- e. An exemplum – a short tale pointing to a certain moral or illustrating a certain doctrine.
- f. A lay – a short narrative poem (a contrast to a ballad).
- g. A chronicle – containing historical facts, can also be fictional.
- h. The life of a saint – the life of a man/ woman who later became a saint is described.
- i. A romance – originally meant only works written in French, but later in all Roman languages. It was later applied to a medieval story describing the deeds of knights.

8. ROMANCE AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

- a. It dealt with the deeds of knights.
- b. It was an aristocratic literary genre.
- c. The plot was very important, because the ideals of the knighthood were expressed in it.
- d. With the decline of ME values romances described the decline of these values and of knightly morality.
- e. It was called an escapist literature of the period.
- f. The romance features an ideal knight who shows his courage in the battles with supernatural beings as well as natural soldiers (a mixture of natural and supernatural elements).
- g. The courage of an ideal knight is tested in spiritual and physical way.
- h. From today's point of view romances were exaggerated and romantic.
- i. Romances by Chrétien de Troyes dealt with the mythical king Arthur and expressed the ideals of French chivalry.
- j. Jean Bodel divided all romances into three subject-matters:
 - the matter of France: French king Charles the Great and his knights (Roland)
 - the matter of Britain: king Arthur and his knights of the Round Table + non-Arthurian romance (King Horn, Havelock)
 - the matter of Rome: Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great; Rome, Thebes, Troy

9. THE ARTHURIAN ROMANCE (THE STANZAIC AND THE ALLITERATIVE VERSION, THOMAS MALORY)

- a. We have King Arthur, his knights, his wife Guenevere, Merlin living in Avalon.
- b. The first romance about King Arthur was written by Robert Wace of Jersey – Roman de Brut, later translated by Layamon – “Brut”. It was written in an alliterative verse.
- c. The alliterative version of the romance is called Morte Arthure (14th cent.). It consists of 6 parts. In this version a strong patriotic feeling is expressed. Alfred is described as arrogant, courageous, and thirsty for blood. He dies in the end because of his nephew Mordred's treason. He is buried in Winchester. The main problems of his kingdom were the dynastic struggles.
- d. The stanzaic version is written in stanzas consisting of 8 lines (typical of French romance) and is entitled Morte Arthur. This version is more compressed, because it is a reminiscent of a ballad (the leaping-and-lingerin narration). Knights are not loyal to their king.
- e. Sir Thomas Malory wrote the most important work on Arthurian romance Le Morte D'Arthur in 1470. It was published by William Caxton who also added his own preface. This was an extensive version of an Arthurian romance. Malory considered the story more important than the structure or the background. The story consists of 8 parts and throughout the stress is on courtly love between Guenevere and Lancelot.

10. COURTLY NOVELS

11. SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT (structure, interpretations)

- a. This romance is written in the new, developed alliterative verse, but not in the OE alliterative line. The alliterative revival was greatly influenced by the French poetry and versification – every line contained one thought. There is also no caesura. This romance is based on a Celtic legend, namely the sacrifice of winter to assure the return of spring. The sacrifice is gained through the beheading of the Green Knight, a supernatural creature, whose miraculous appearance in the castle represents a challenge to the Knights of the

Round Table. The romance consists of two plots, The Beheading Game and The temptations of the Lady. It is written in the tradition of courtly love, celebrating chivalry, truth, loyalty, piety, sexual chastity, restraint. The framework techniques is used together with many Arthurian elements, characters. Also supernatural elements are present. Animals have a symbolic value. There are also many dramatic scenes i.e. love scenes etc.

12. GEOFFREY CHAUCER (INFLUENCES, MAIN WORKS, THE CANTERBURY TALES, THE GENERAL PROLOGUE)

- a. His language established the London dialect as a linguistic norm – Modern English.
- b. He was a diplomat, traveller, courtier, translator, and poet.
- c. He employed the framework of a dream-vision.
- d. He translated the allegorical work The Romaunt of the Rose.
- e. He wrote:
 - The Book of the Duchess.
 - The House of Fame, based on classical mythology.
 - The Parlement of Fouls (a dream-vision) – criticism of the concept of courtly love.
 - The Canterbury Tales (1388-1400).
 - The siege of Troy, Troilus and Criseyde.
- f. He was influenced by an earlier medieval philosopher Boethius – Consolation of Philosophy.
- g. The Canterbury Tales consist of 24 tales in various genres. They are introduced by The General Prologue – pilgrimage - a competition in tale telling. Some important tales are “The Knight’s Tale”, “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”,... He uses realistic descriptions, concentrates on details. Pilgrims are the stereotypes. He uses satire and irony.