

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND. GERMANIC CONQUEST OF BRITAIN. OLD ENGLISH CULTURE & CIVILIZATION. (450 – 1066)

THE GERMANIC CONQUEST (after the Roman withdrawal)

- three major Germanic tribes: the **Angles**, the **Saxons** and the **Jutes** (Pagans)
- they came from Denmark and Norway
- successfully invaded the Roman colony of Britain in the 5th and 6th cts.
- brought with them their language, specific poetic tradition, their paganism and their warrior traditions
- driven the Christianised Celtic inhabitants of Britain westwards to Wales and Cornwall and northwards into the Highlands of Scotland
- the colonisation was evident in new place-names, the exceptions were the names of the fortified Roman towns which were delineated by the Latin-derived suffixes *-chester* and *-cester*
- clash of religions and values between the Romans and the Pagans (also reflected in literature)

RE-CHRISTIANIZATION

- began in the late 6th ct.
- in the south the mission was entrusted to a group of Benedictines sent from Rome by **Pope Gregory the Great**, the mission was led by **Augustine**, the first Archbishop of Canterbury (the southern kingdoms became Christian)
- a chain of monasteries was eventually established
- in Northumbria the Christianity came from Ireland
- by the end of the 7th ct. all the kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England had accepted the discipline and order of Roman Christianity
- the old runic alphabet of the Germanic tribes, which seems to have been used largely for inscriptions, was gradually replaced by Roman letters (until the 8th ct. literature was transmitted orally – the **oral phase**)
- newly imposed written literature was in Latin
- England was thus brought into the mainstream of Western European culture
- **Bede** (673 – 735) was the first great English historian, who wrote *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which is an indispensable record of the advance of Christianity in England (it also treated England as a unit even though it was still divided among several kingdoms)
- **Alcuin** (735 – 804) was the most respected and widely accomplished scholar at the influential court of Charlemagne, where he established educational system; through him, Britain became known throughout Europe

The six kingdoms that England was divided into in the 7th and 8th cts.:

1. Northumbria (ruled in the 7th century)
2. Mercia (ruled in the 8th century)
3. East Anglia
4. York
5. Kent
6. Wessex with the capital Winchester (ruled in the 9th century)

The bilingual situation (prior 1066):

- a) **OE vernacular** – locally spoken languages; OE dialects were highly inflected and had many borrowings from the Scandinavian languages and from Latin, the most important was the West-Saxon (Wessex), which became the linguistic norm for modern English.
- b) **Latin** – liturgy

ALFRED, KING OF WESSEX (reigned 871 – 899). THE RENAISSANCE OF LETTERS.

- in the 8th ct. the kings of Mercia reigned to people of England; at the beginning of the 9th ct. the throne was transmitted to Wessex
- the Vikings controlled the greater part of England; in 878 king Alfred defeated the Vikings in the **battle of Edington** so that England was divided into two parts: **Wessex** and **Danelaw** (east of Watling Street – Essex, East Anglia, Northumbria)

Alfred's legacy:

- he referred to the tongue which he spoke and in which he wrote as “englisc”
- he gave his attention to good government and to scholarship
- he wanted to change the bilingual situation in England by promoting and assisting in the translation of Latin works into OE (by defeating Latin and creating a new language), therefore he brought many educated people from Europe to England to translate
- in order to create the Anglo-Saxon tradition original works in OE were produced as well and the translations were paraphrased so that they could be regarded as originals
- he encouraged the compilation of The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles (871 – 1154) – annals written by various authors each year to describe history (non-fiction)

King Alfred's translations:

1. PASTORAL CARE

- originally by Pope Gregory the Great
- king Alfred added the **Preface**, in which he described his literary programme, explained his aims and ideas: • wanted to create liberal education and to develop **Liberal Arts** (non-religious disciplines): geometry, rhetoric, history, literature...
 - claimed that not only religious themes were important
 - complained about the low level of English learning, that only Latin works were available and that most of the OE works had been destroyed by the Vikings
 - wanted to bring literature to ordinary people

2. UNIVERSAL HISTORY

- originally by Orosius
- a historical work, an encyclopedia of texts describing the growth of Christianity in England, historical events; also includes travelogues, psalms...
- close to the original; king Alfred added certain parts with his own point of view

3. THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

- originally by Boethius
- “philosophy” = positive substitute for Man's existential trauma because it gives answers

4. SOLILOQUIES

- originally by St. Augustine, the first bishop of Canterbury
- monologues

5. THE ECCLASTICAL HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH PEOPLE

- originally by Bede the Venerable
- many historical facts; also fiction

- precious source for the study of the OE culture

After king Alfred's death, the Viking attacks became successful. From 899 till 1016, England was ruled by a Danish king Canute the Great, and the OE tradition was almost destroyed (Danish influence).

OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE

The characteristics of feudal society reflected in literature:

- highly hierarchical society (social pyramid)
- anonymous censorship has left us with a generally elevated, elevating, and **male-centred** literature, one which lays a stress on the **virtues of a tribal community**, on the **ties of loyalty between the lord and liegeman**, on the significance of **individual heroism**, and on the powerful sway of **“wyrd”** (fate) = fatalistic attitude towards death

The main literary genres:

1. RELIGIOUS POETRY
2. HEROIC EPIC (relationship between king and lords; strong narrative elements)
3. SEMI-RELIGIOUS POETRY
4. LYRICAL POETRY (secular)
5. SERMONS, HOMILIES
6. HISTORICAL WORKS, ANALS (written by monks; about kings, history...; always contained some fiction)

Common features of OE literature:

- a) images of **evil/darkness** vs. **goodness/light** – the impact of Christianity and the western concept of the bipolar, the black&white view of the world
- b) **order** vs. **chaos** – pagan society/lawlessness vs. Christianity/law (great desire for order in society)
- c) apocalyptic view of the world
- d) poetry was a public and communal art, it was designed for public repetition, recitation and improvisation
- e) professional poet or **scop** was the original improviser of a song on heroic themes

Four most significant surviving volumes of OE verse, the manuscript:

1. THE BEOWULF MS
2. THE EXETER BOOK (*The Wife's Lament, The Wanderer, The Seafarer, Deor, Widsith, The Ruin*)
3. THE JUNIUS MS
4. THE VERCELLI MS

All are the products of monastic *scriptoria* (writing-rooms) and written on parchment by anonymous authors.

OLD ENGLISH PROSE

- represented by a large number of religious works

Aethelwold: Rule of St Benedict

- a translation (paraphrase) by a monk
- the style shows great knowledge, erudition, versatility

- Aelfric:** - wrote sermons homilies and about the lives of saints (which was a popular genre)
- some of his writings were used as textbooks for monks
 - his works were intended to instruct
 - **Wulfstan:** emotional, not very didactic; analysis of the characters; “the Vikings come to England because the English sin so much”

OLD ENGLISH RELIGIOUS POETRY

Caedmon: “Hymn”

- composite authorship
- the earliest dated poem
- a group of people gathered in an abbey competing in writing poems
- God is described as an actual, down-to-earth figure
- celebration of the divine presence
- source: the Bible
- oral origins of the OE poetry

Cynewulf:

- a monk, who used themes from the Bible
- semi-religious – about lives of people
- genre: **biblical paraphrase** – stories put in verse
- complex, meditative, sophisticated
- allusions to ancient classical tradition
- *The Fates of the Apostles*: missionary journeys and martyrdoms of Christ’s disciples being cast in the roles of Nordic heroes
- “**Juliana**” and “**Elene**”: introduction of a new genre – the life of a saint, and of women in poetry; female saints described as down-to-earth characters

The Dream of the Rood:

- anonymous
- profound, moving and intellectually sophisticated
- the “**dream vision**” genre
- rood = cross
- part 1: the author tells about his dream to a group of people; the cross spoke about its existence
- part 2: cross urged the speaker to travel and promote its cult
- part 3: the speaker woke up and his life changed
- cross – **duality of human existence** (world vs. spirituality), the **instrument of salvation**

“Soul and Body”:

- anonymous
- the “**soul-and-body**” genre – about duality of human existence
- the form of a debate between the body and the soul which are personified
- the question: which one is more important?
- the idea: life after death, which is determined by the life on earth, is more important

THE ELEGIES

Deor the Poet: “Deor”

- unknown author – scop
- an elegy about the process of poetic creation
- the poet wants to become famous and to create a monument to himself to secure his immortality
- propaganda of Christianity
- ALLITERATION: repetition of consonants (**staves**) in the words that are stressed, thus interesting sound effects are achieved – alliterative sound (otherwise typical for the heroic epic tradition)

“Widsith”:

- a soliloquy by a scop
- apocalyptic, images of death
- about the processes of writing poetry and the scop’s vocation in society
- the idea: poems are important for transmitting knowledge through generations

“The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer”:

- themes: 1. EXILE (voluntary or forced)
2. SPIRITUAL ISOLATION
3. LAST SURVIVOR – the apocalyptic vision
4. TRANSCIENCE (shortness of life) – wyrd
- the monologues speak of the existential trauma
- the poems transcend the problems of feudalism
- very influential in the 20th ct. because of the typical 20th ct. feelings: apocalyptic, nihilistic, resigned into fate, no active desire to change it, loneliness & isolation (W.H. Auden: “The Wanderer”)
- **“The Wanderer”**: • the narrator claims to have lost his lord (**forced exile**) and is now confronted with a bitterly alienating vision of frozen waves, sea-birds and winter cold
 - the emptiness and the winter violence are rendered as the embodiment of the failure of human relationships, of loneliness and exile
 - the narrator cannot find the concept of God, is not a believer
 - he finds comfort in **self-reliance** – God is not the only answer
 - hierarchy should be preserved
- **“The Seafarer”**: • the exile is **self-imposed**
 - though the Seafarer delights in the security of life on shore, he also distrust it
 - contrast between the comforts of a settled life on land and the hardships and dangers of the sea
 - lyrical; realistic descriptions
 - experiences at sea represent **temptations for man**, but he is able to resist

Poems dealing with women:

- **“The Wife’s Lament”** vs. **“The Husband’s Message”**: a debate of two points of view about the roles in marriage
- **“Judith”**: a female warrior as the protagonist, a woman saint; discusses the position of women in OE society

Poems about animals:

- “**The Whale**” and “**The Phoenix**”: describe the presence of divinity, of God in this world; mythical value; the animals symbolize the Nature; “a path of whale” = the sea

OLD ENGLISH HEROIC POETRY

THE EPIC OF BEOWULF (6TH – 8TH CT.)

- the first major preserved narrative poem and artistic literary achievement in English culture
- composite authorship
- structure: 3000 lines of verse, separated into 43 sections – fitts; divided into 2 parts
- form: heroic verse; alliteration; in OE tradition verses contained a varying number of syllables at least one of which had to be accented, accents were grammatical (some were artificial); **hemistiches** (half-lines) were linked by staves, I. **on-verse**, II. **off-verse**, **caesura** = thematic and phonetic break
- stylistic devices: **VARIATION** (in connection with parallelism): repeating the information given in the 1st line, and adding nothing substantially new in the 2nd line; **KENNING**: a descriptive compound, a primitive OE metaphor formed by making new compounds using a noun and some other part of speech, used frequently to make poems more poetic, became stereotypes and even clichés, exam. *seagoer*, *ringdispenser*; **HEITI**: substitution of one noun for another, exam. *spear = wood*; **UNDERSTATEMENT**: a description of sth by minimizing it, by stating its opposite, captures attention, has a humorous effect, it’s close to exaggeration
- themes:
 1. struggle between the forces of good/light and evil/darkness
 2. the theme of a good king and he should behave
 3. fratricide
 4. revenge as a never ending circle
 5. transience
 6. courage, loyalty...
- irony: the Danish society is ruined from within, although it is powerful and united on the outside; the king of Geats is destroyed despite the fact that the dragon was defeated
- *Beowulf* can properly be called an “epic” poem in the sense that it celebrates the achievements of a hero in narrative verse
- *Beowulf* refers back to an age of monster slayings in Scandinavia, but it interprets them as struggles between good and evil, between humanity and the destructive forces which undo human order; Grendel, the first monster of the poem, is seen as the enemy of God
- the epic shows a transition from the barbarian (pagan, Viking) world into the Christian civilization; the pagan society represents vengeance, incest, killing of family members
- chaos vs. order
- *Beowulf* meditates between a settled and unsettled culture, between one which enjoys the benefits of a stable, ordered, agricultural society and one which relished the restlessness of the wandering warrior hero
- by battling against manifestations of evil, God’s purposes could be realized
- in the 2nd part, the motive for evil is different from that in the 1st part – it is material, **the cult of gold**

- reasons for destruction of the Danish kingdom are both **external** (Grendel) and **internal** (weakness of the Danish society and lack of loyalty)
- the epic tries to establish new values, a new code of behaviour for society: courage, loyalty, fame achieved through heroic deeds, nobility
- MYTHOPOESIS = creation of myths through literature
- J.R.R. Tolkien: Beowulf, the Critics and the Monsters: the main theme of *Beowulf* is the struggle between evil and goodness, evil is present and has to be fought constantly

The first part – genealogy:

The Danes are described as a prosperous tribe with a dynastic tradition. Prosperity is symbolized by the goodness of the king Hrothgar. Mead-hall, the central hall where all the lords meet and drink, and Heorot, the court, are the symbols of power and unity of the Danish kingdom. A supernatural creature Grendel (evil), who had killed his brother and lives isolated in the moors, enters the Danish kingdom. During the night, he enters the mead-hall, where everybody is asleep. He takes one of the lords in his cave and eats him. Night attacks continue for 12 years. The Danes call for the young warrior Beowulf to come from Geatland (Sweden) and save them. He is seized by Grendel. In the battle, Beowulf cuts off Grendel's arm, and Grendel returns to his cave, where he dies. Evil returns in the form of Grendel's mother, who comes to take vengeance upon the Danes. In the night, she seizes one of the oldest, wisest lords, and Beowulf is again asked to confront the monster. He goes to the moors and can only reach the cave through water. In a fierce fight Beowulf is almost killed, but he kills the monster with a sword and takes her head to the Danes as a visible proof. He returns to Geatland, where he is greeted as a hero and given the king's daughter Freawaru. He becomes the king of the Geats. In the end of the 1st part, there is a fire in the mead-hall as a symbolic purification and a downfall in order for something new to happen.

The second part – the present time (a flash forward):

Beowulf, an old king, has ruled the Geats for many years. Evil appears again in the form of a very greedy dragon. Its central motive is money, and it is angry because its treasure had been stolen from it by a fugitive slave. Beowulf still lives in the illusion of his youth and wants to do everything by himself, he is a totalitarian ruler. He fights the dragon, but doesn't trust his lords at first. When he is almost killed, he calls for help from the lords. They are no longer loyal and don't help him. However, one of them, Wiglaf, is brave enough to help him. He is the obvious successor. Because Beowulf was fighting for money and was egoistic, he has to die. He is buried in a pagan way. Wiglaf becomes the new king.

THE BATTLE OF MALDEN (1000)

- the protagonist is a martyr, generously throwing away his life and those of his royal vassals, for the sake of his liegeland, King Ethelred, and for his nation
- the epic is more poetic than *Beowulf*

HEROIC LAYS

- short dramatic poems containing elements of folklore and supernatural elements
- include actual historical figures (Canute, Attila, Eormanric)
- themes: sacrifice, loyalty, courage, the king – thane relationship

THE NORMAN CONQUEST (1066)

“Peaceful velvet” revolution (“velvet” occupation):

William the Conqueror found England a feudal land, ruled by a native aristocracy and ordered by a rich and influential Church. The Conquest resulted in the supplanting of an English-speaking upper class by a French-speaking one. William left England trilingual, with a literate clergy still refined by Latin, but with Norman French defining a new ruling class (superstratum) and with English (OE stratum) now largely confined to the ruled. It was only in the mid-fourteenth century that English was permitted to be used in petitions to Parliament, in legal procedure, and in legal documents such as wills and deeds.

The French considered themselves more cultured and sophisticated. The new king was generally inclined to respect established English institutions and customs. Those who settled permanently in England would soon be calling themselves English. Reasons for their inhostility towards the English were:

- they started to feel British because they relied only on the estates in Britain (they lost the land in France)
- William the Conqueror was a quite democratic Anglo-Norman king
- the English were not defeated as far as their language is concerned

Dialects:

1. NORTHUMBRIAN
2. EAST MIDDLELAND (the normative language, through Chaucer)
3. WEST MIDDLELAND
4. SOUTHERN
5. KENTISH

The religious centre moved from Winchester to **Canterbury**.

The linguistic situation:

- coexistence of two languages: the Old English (the majority) and the Norman French dialect (10%)
- from the 12th ct. onwards, fusion (amalgamation) and disappearance of the OE language took place
- the French made many mistakes trying to learn the OE, consequently a new, **Middle English language** developed: a hybrid combination of OE Germanic roots and the French-Latin grammar; more than 10 thousand words of French and Latin origins were added in the so called “borrowing process”; ME became a very subtle and flexible language, more sophisticated meanings were expressed by French words; it was much simpler than OE (many inflections and case endings disappeared, new prefixes and suffixes came into use)

The first organized university studies developed:

- TRIVIUM: grammar, rhetoric, logic
- QUADRIVIUM: astronomy, arithmetic, music, geometry
- the rhetoric was the most important: literary originality was of a minor importance

MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

Norman influence on the themes in literature:

- ❑ the Conquest effectively eliminated upper-class patronage of OE secular poetry and prose and gradually supplanted it with a new literary culture, responsive to wider influences, international in outlook
- ❑ themes that were common throughout Europe: CHIVALRY, COURTLY LOVE, CHURCH as an institution
- ❑ for the first time, England came in closer contact with the continental Europe and became a part of the Euro-tradition, cut off from the Scandinavian influence and connected with the literature of antiquity – the classical Greek and Roman literature became the new source

The Bible: the first translation of the Bible into English was made by **Wycliff** – a major critic of the Roman Catholic Church, now considered more as a reformer than as a writer.

BENEDICTINE REVIVAL (12th ct.)

- ❑ by the monk **Wulfstan**, who wanted to keep the OE tradition alive
- ❑ coexistence of Old English among French and ME
- ❑ **Ancrene Riwe**: instruction and comfort of three young aristocratic women who had elected to withdraw into a life of solitary prayer and contemplation to identify with Christ's suffering; the struggle to abandon the secular life for religion; Christ is not described as supernatural – he should not be feared

The central concerns of the ME literature:

- FEUDALISM, which came to perfection
- the clash between the **individual** and the **collective**, the dilemma between **privacy** and the **social collective demands of society**

The interpretation of literary works:

- LITTERA: the lowest, literal level
- SENSUS: the significance of themes
- SENTENTIA: the symbolic and metaphorical

The techniques of ME writing:

- the code of the ME writing: SOLAS & SENTENCE (Dulce et Utile) – entertaining and useful (the influence of the Greek and Latin writers)
- AMPLIFICATION: broadening parts of the text; the usage of repetitions, comparisons, apostrophes, flash-backs, subplots, descriptions (moving away from the main line of events)
- the LEAPING-AND-LINGERING NARRATION: skipping the less important parts and lingering at descriptions
- STOCK-DESCRIPTIONS: prescribed, generalized, stereotype descriptions; descriptions of people and details were very important
- ABBREVIATION: shortening the parts of the text that the author considered less important

Features of poetry:

- ❑ the SYLLABIC LINE replaced the alliterative line: accents and syllables were counted > the **accentual-syllabic system**

- ALEGORICAL REPRESENTATION as the central poetic device: allegory – an element is given and a key is needed to decode what the element represents

CHIVALRY

- the responsibilities of the “noblesse oblige” – the code of behaviour of an ideal knight: **courtesy, generosity, courage** in defending the country or the honour of a lady, **piety** (defending the Church), **loyalty** to the King and to the lady, **protection of the poor** from injustice, **behaving in a gentleman-like way** to the lady
- the Crusades became the means for impoverished knights to make money – **greed**: in literature it is the root of evil and the greatest sin

COURTLY LOVE between a knight and his lady, involving complex social and psychological rules; a combination of two lines of influence:

- **chivalric**: courtly love raises courage, generosity, loyalty and demands total submission to the lady; love starts as a friendship (semi-platonic attitude); the knight is in love with a socially equal member (of the same rank)
- **courtly**: the troubadour is of a lower rank than the lady and is guided solely by his love; he sees love as a concept and is in love with it; he has to constantly praise, honour and serve his lady, but has to be discrete; the stress is on the process of courtship – the perfect lover has to satisfy the lady, show sincerity, fidelity and abandon all his pride
- ❖ MEZURA: moderation and balance – the lover has to display his wisdom and balance of his behaviour
- ❖ RATIO AMORIS: love was controlled by reason, but they saw reason and emotions as indivisible
- ❖ ADULTERY: courtly love usually occurred between a married woman and an unmarried man; courtly love stressed the need for adulteress love, it wasn't judged harshly, because marriages were pre-arranged and were not a result of love and were seen as a social form
- ❖ SENSUALITY: came after the friendship and spiritual love

The influence of courtly love:

- Chaucer: the translation of The Romance of the Rose; Troilus and Criseyde – ironic attitude towards courtly love, it is exaggerated
- Arthurian romance: a cycle of romances describing King Arthur and his knights
- Capellanus: a manual for lovers – “the lover is in agony until the lady accepts him”
- The Metaphysical Poets: wrote in the tradition of courtly love
- the Victorian era: courtly love was trivialized

THE LITERARY GENRES

BALLAD: - usually sung; at first a part of the oral tradition

- the ballad stanza: 4 lines (alternating 4 and 3 accents per line), rhyme abcb

EXEMPLUM: a fable usually taken from the animal world

FABLIAU: describing animals' physical activities (imported from France)

TRAVELOGUE: experiences and observations of a traveller

CHRONICLE: fiction (semi-literary)

LAY: a short narrative poem

REVERDIE: a poem that celebrates the return of spring, vitality, life, a beginning of something new

LIFE OF A SAINT: about the secular life of a saint (semi-religious)

BODY AND SOUL

DEBATE: between two people or animals; The Owl and the Nightingale discuss different approaches to life, the owl is life-denying, the nightingale claims the importance of entertainment and fun

DREAM VISION: influenced by The Romance of the Rose; the narrator is unable to sleep, when he does fall asleep he has a vision in his dream, he usually wakes up in a beautiful garden which represents his **desire for perfection**, he always wakes up with a guide who takes him to a place where several people are involved in a **debate about the dualism of life** (physical vs. spiritual), usually no conclusion is given – the narrator wakes up suddenly and **without answers**

COURTLY NOVEL:

- stress is on the plot and adventures
- episodic in structure
- realistic techniques in describing plots
- a great deal of supernatural
- the adventures of protagonists were both physical and spiritual
- constant temptations for protagonists
- characters were tragic: they started high, experienced a downfall, suffered, were made to see things about themselves and society and became more humble and aware
- social background was also described, lower classes and women were well represented
- courtly novel represents the decline of the typical medieval values
- **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight**
- **Sir Orfeo, King Horn, Haveloc the Dane**: the protagonists (tragic heroes) are members of nobility who lose their positions and try to regain their wealth, castles..., usually they are successful; through suffering they become more humble; but they are not only about aristocracy, they are also about lower classes, women are as important as men; little French influence; the focus is on the action rather than on courtesy
- Marie de France (12th ct.): **Lais**: amatory encounters of knights and ladies in a world informed by both chivalrous action and supernatural influence; first to use the Celtic background

ROMANCE:

- Imported from the continent
- the aristocratic literary genre (written by and for aristocracy) – appealed to the values and tastes of nobility
- labelled as an “escapist” genre (escape from reality)
- considered as the beginning of the trivial popular literature
- tends to present the heroes as knights pursuing a lonely quest, but also stresses the importance of the shared, communal values of a chivalric world
- exaggerated in descriptions of emotions
- themes: knights, courtly love
- at the beginning, they were written in the alliterative verse; gradually the stanzaic verse forms came into use
- towards the end of the ME period, literary texts written from the lower class point of view emerged
- romance’s spirit was imitated by the romantic literature (adventure, exotic, courtly love...)
- the division by Jean Bodel according to the subject matter:
 - a) **matter of France** (about King Charles the Great)
 - b) **matter of Britain** – the Arthurian romance
 - c) **matter of Rome** (about the classical antiquity, Julius Caesar)
 - d) **non-arthurian matter of Britain** (characters strongly connected with the English folklore and the Celtic roots)

ARTHURIAN ROMANCE:

- King Arthur was a military leader of the Celts in the fight against the Saxons in the 5th ct.; nowadays, he's a fictitious, supernatural figure
- King Arthur appears both in English and French literature. The link is his Celtic origins.
- King Arthur is mentioned for the 1st time by **Geoffrey of Monmouth** in The History of the Kings of Britain (12th ct.), which is the basis for the development of the Arthurian romance
- Wace of Jersey (a priest): Roman de Brut; the British version was produced by **Layamon: Brut** (12th ct.) – stressing the link to the ancient Rome
- **Chrétien de Troyes** concentrated on Lancelot and on the tradition of courtly love (French interest for the Celtic because of Brittany)
- Lancelot loses significance, the knight Galahad is described as an ideal knight and as “a chaste” – the only one who can search for the **Holy Grail** (= vitality, new life)
- Arthur's fabled court became a fixed point to which a whole variety of legends, Celtic myths, religious, literary and moral concepts could be attached
- the elements that were added later: Merlin, death, Avalon, Excalibur (the magical sword)

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT (14th ct.)

- ◆ found with three other manuscripts: Pearl, Purity and Patience (thematically different)
- ◆ written in the Midland dialect
- ◆ one of the last works written in the alliterative verse
- ◆ Sir Gawain is one of the knights of the Round Table and represents an ideal medieval knight with military skills, courtesy (sexual restraint) and humility (towards the Church), but lacking individual characteristics
- ◆ two sub-plots: 1. the **Beheading Game** (the framework, the central plot) and 2. the **Seduction of the Lady** (the exchange of gifts)
- ◆ the quest theme: physical and spiritual quest (introspective journey)
- ◆ dramatic atmosphere
- ◆ the symbolism of the animals that Lord Bertilak hunts: the 1st day: deer – wisdom, the 2nd day: boar – indecisiveness, the 3rd day: fox - insincerity
- ◆ most critics see the romance as an allegorical representation of the temptations of chivalry
- ◆ interpretations: 1. Celtic: the Green Knight represents the return of life and fertility
2. Christian: the Green Knight represents evil and death that Gawain successfully fights
3. neutral: Gawain is the main character who passes from innocence to experience – the growing up process (during the journey he learns about himself)

VERSIONS OF KING ARTHUR'S DEATH (14th ct.)

1. MORTE ARTHUR – the alliterative version:
 - the stress is on the political battle and development of British dynasties; Arthur is both the king and the first knight; he proves himself as a courageous military leader (physical strength); he is compared to Charles the Great; he is killed in the battle with his nephew, who wants to dethrone him
 - the episodes are very dramatic
 - the heroic-epic version: it creates a hero out of Arthur
 - an example of mythopoesis (creating a powerful historical figure was important for national identity)
2. LE MORTE D'ARTHUR – the stanzaic version:
 - stanzas, syllabic metrical system (French influence)

- French influence also on the subject matter: adulteress love between Lancelot and Guenevere, but it's not judged morally, it is given as a historical fact with an important influence; it also symbolizes the decline of the power of the kingdom and of the courtly love values
- dynastic struggles between Mordred and Arthur
- danger for the kingdom comes from within
- Arthur represents hope for the British kingdom

Sir Thomas Malory: LE MORTE DARTHURE

- ❑ the predecessor of the development of the novel
- ❑ written in prison; printed in 1485 by William Caxton
- ❑ the year **1485** represents the turning point: the end of the War of Roses between Lancaster (Malory) and York, and the decline of values of courtly love and knighthood, which are only the illusions and aspirations of the period
- ❑ regarded as the best prose work of ME period
- ❑ Malory looked back to the first establishment and the glorious realization of the ideals of knighthood while the England of his own age was witnessing the bloody decline of the authority of a military aristocracy
- ❑ a combination of the alliterative and the stanzaic version
- ❑ Malory traces the Arthurian story from the King's birth, education, assumption of power and to his court's tragic decay
- ❑ long sections about the careers of Lancelot, Gareth ..., about the pursuit of the Holy Grail, about the adulteress love of Lancelot and Guinevere
- ❑ 8 tales; straightforward narrative
- ❑ the narrator is moved into the background; the main characters comment the action – more viewpoints and objectivity (balanced and concentrated on all aspects)
- ❑ elements of Celtic folklore
- ❑ in the 8th part the narrator addresses the reader to pray for Arthur's return
- ❑ an important source was Chrétien de Troyes's Lancelot (12th ct.)

LATE MEDIEVAL RELIGIOUS WRITING

“THE LIFE OF A SAINT” and MYSTIC PROSE:

Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love

- first major female writer in English tradition
- an account of her mystical, religious experience, based on her illness
- supremely distinguished, female spirituality
- she sees divine love as providing the answer to all the problems of human existence – the need for internalised life

Margery Kempe: The Book of Margery Kempe

- a vigorous if somewhat disorganized writer, one of the earliest and most revealing autobiographers in English
- an account of her mental disorders, her visions, and her almost pathological religiosity, written in a spiritual crisis
- a good insight into the position and thinking of women at that time

WILLIAM LANGLAND

The Vision of Piers Plowman

- one of the most searching Christian narratives in the English language
- exploring and demonstrating the active involvement of God in his physical Creation
- at certain crucial points readers are bidden to recognize Christ himself in the representative human figure of Piers
- the Son of God humbles himself by taking the form of a country workman

GEOFFREY CHAUCER (14th ct.)

- his work established the London dialect, which was the linguistic and literary norm for the modern English
- first he was a translator: The Romaunt of the Rose – influenced his own work
- his poetry expresses and embodies a firm sense of order, which is evident in his reflections on the nature and workings of the cosmos, and in his steady affirmations of an orthodox Christian belief in divine involvement in human affairs
- recognised that the natural and the human worlds could be seen as interrelated in the divine scheme of things, and, like the kingdom of heaven, ordered in hierarchies
- he's considered the father of English poetry
- beginning of the 20th ct.: his works were considered Christian allegories
- the second half of the 20th ct.: the stress had moved to dialogic representation of medieval reality and the clash in the medieval society that Chaucer wanted to point at – the religious and serious life vs. the carnivalesque aspect of it
- the past 10 years: the stress on the feminine perspective and Chaucer's supposed anti-feminism, and on Chaucer's social criticism, the criticism of all institutions and ideologies
- The Book of the Duchess (dream vision)
- The House of Fame (dream vision): based on classical mythology
- The Parlement of Fowls (dream vision and debate): on the Valentine's Day birds choose their mates; criticism of courtly love
- Troilus and Criseyde: set into the classical antiquity; courtly love is destroyed by passion; Boccaccio and Boethius's influence – condemning the physical life

The Canterbury Tales:

- 24 tales in various genres
- the framework is a pilgrimage to Canterbury - a broad spectrum of sinful humanity on an earthly journey, which original readers would have recognized as a prevision of, and a preparation for, a heavenly one
- the pilgrims represent the English society, but are not individualized personalities, they are typified, stereotypes; the human world determined by the question of degree, and of social perceptions conditioned by rank
- the General Prologue sets out the circumstances which bring the pilgrims together at the Tabard Inn before they set off for Canterbury to pray at the tomb of the martyred St Thomas Becket, and presents the pilgrims according to their estate
- a good tale should have an important idea and a moral message, and should entertain and be funny
- the Knight is placed first and is followed by his son the Squire and his attendant Yeoman
- the representative of the Church: the Prioress, Nun, the Monk, Friar

- the third estate (rich, middling and poor): Merchant, Oxford Clerk, Sergeant of the Law, Franklin
- the urban guildsmen; the skilled tradesmen; well-off widow with a trade of her own – the Wife of Bath
- Chaucer casts himself in the role of an incompetent story-teller
- the Host of the Tabard proposes that each of the pilgrims should tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the return journey
- the Knight's taking precedence as the first story-teller is not merely a matter of chance: the **Knight's Tale**: a high minded history of the rivalry of two noble cousins for the love of a princess, a history elegantly complemented by accounts of supernatural intervention in human affairs
- undermining the commonly held medieval idea of the natural inferiority of women to men by representing articulate and intelligent women at the centre of human affairs rather than on the periphery – the **Wife of Bath**: is certainly no model of meekness, patience and chastity; she builds up a spirited case against conventional, theoretical, clerically inspired anti-feminism