The Middle Ages before 1300

The relationship between literary text and social context in the Old English period is very difficult to establish because it is usually not clear in which part of England, or in which century, any particular text was originally written. The High Middle Ages, from the late eleventh century onwards, are better documented but open to a great diversity of interpretation and telling.

This is partly because of the different ways in which the Middle Ages have been viewed, ever since the Renaissance gave them their belittling name, suggesting long wasted centuries since the Roman Empire. The word *Gothic* was also originally an expression of disgust, since the Goths were thought to have destroyed the glories of Rome. The barbaric also fascinates, however, and since the middle of the 18th century the Medieval has become a source of exotic titillation for the nostalgic mind, in contrast to the obscurantism for which it was synonymous in the eyes of Rationalism, that saw the period as a Dark Age.

The history of the Middle Ages is complex; it is important to know about works written in other parts of Europe. English medieval writings are only a minor part of what was produced, incomparably less important than French, Italian, and even German works, many of which are of great interest still today.

Social history

William the Conqueror was ruthless in his take-over of England; it is well-named as the Norman Conquest. When he died in 1087, there were only two English landowners left. The English aristocrats who survived Hastings either emigrated (as far as Byzantium in some cases) or became mere farmers. The invading culture was considered superior, things English were despised; in central areas, at least, there were many English who learned French and gave their children French names. One quarter of England was given to the Church, which foreigners dominated, with Norman bishops and abbots everywhere. Soon after the Conquest, William stopped trying to learn English and after 1070 all official documents were written in Latin, not English. The 170 Norman nobles to whom William gave most of England made little effort to live on their lands or speak to their tenants.

Under William, the social distinctions in rural society hardened; at the bottom of the feudal scale were the nation's fifty thousand serfs, who had no rights at all and were attached to the land they worked. In 1085, William ordered a uniquely detailed survey of the rural population and land-holding of all England, called the Domesday Book. Land-owners held manors and were the local lords. For a time social mobility was forbidden. Yet these years were also marked by a new dynamism; the Normans restored the Church in the north, constructed new cathedrals, founded new monasteries, promoted education. They also gave new importance to the cities and towns.

When Peter the Hermit provoked the first Crusade, which led to the capture of Jerusalem in 1099 and the establishment of a Christian kingdom in the Holy Land, Normans played an important role. It may well be the crusades, with their strange mixture of adventurism and religious idealism, that caused the rise of what came to be known as Chivalry. The great lords of England, usually termed barons, like those of France, had a duty to raise an army when needed. Fighting required a professionalism, and equipment, that took money. Therefore there arose a class of landed gentry who were encouraged to spend much of their time away on campaigns, and to bring some of their sons with them as squires, too.

These gentlemen-warriors were known as knights and were addressed as Sir, a title received from the king personally, not inherited. The knight normally went into battle on horse-back, so in French he was called *chevalier* from the word for a horse.

When William of Normandy died in 1087, the royal succession was not an easy matter. Should England and Normandy continue as a single kingdom? William left England to one son, William Rufus (the 'Red'), and Normandy to another, the lands were divided against all reason. Rufus was a wild character and was finally killed by a well-directed arrow while he was hunting. His younger brother Henry became king of England and in 1106 took control of Normandy too. When Henry died in 1135 his daughter Matilda should have become queen but his younger sister's son, Stephen, seized power. In 1144 Stephen lost control of Normandy to the count of Anjou, the region directly to the south of Normandy, who had married Matilda while Henry was still alive. Stephen died in 1154. Henry II, who followed him, was the son of Matilda, his father had been the third Latin king of Jerusalem, as well as count of Anjou and duke of Normandy. England was now part of a very large kingdom. Henry's family name was Plantagenet. It became the name of the whole dynasty, the Plantagenets.

Henry II's reign was marked by a strong tension between the king and the Church about power; this led to confrontation between the king and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, which culminated in Becket's murder inside his cathedral by a band of knights, claiming to be acting on the king's behalf, in December 1170. The king was forced to submit to the Church, and Becket became England's most important saint.

Henry's wife was Eleanor of Aquitaine, who had first been married to the king of northern France; she divorced him, married Henry, and brought to England the territory of Aquitaine stretching beyond Anjou in south-west France, as far as the Pyrenees. Her grandfather, Guilhem IX of Aquitaine, is the earliest named troubadour and Eleanor is a major figure in the history of literature.

Not surprisingly, their son Richard the Lionheart (*Coeur de lion*) was one of the most poetic figures in English royal history. Most of his reign from 1189 until 1199 was spent in wars abroad; he was killed during the Third Crusade, still childless, and his brother John succeeded him. John lost control of Normandy and Anjou to the kings of France in 1204, a loss that left England with little to call its own across the sea. In later literature, the adventures of Robin Hood and his band of outlaws in Sherwood Forest are set in the time of Richard and John.

John had to confront the difficult problem of the rights and powers of the Catholic Church in an independent kingdom, he lost a struggle for control of the Church and had to submit to Rome. John is most noted for having agreed to the document called Magna Carta in 1215. This was the outcome of various power-struggles within English society, it gave each person the right to be tried by his peers according to the traditional laws of the land. The throne became the guarantee of justice for all people, against the autocratic despotism of the local lords.

For most of the 13th century, the king of England was Henry III (reigned 1216-1272), and during his reign the English Parliament was begun, largely by the efforts of Simon de Montfort; in particular, in 1265 he created the first Parliament dominated by commoners from the towns of England. The result of all this was a new sense of English identity.

The French language introduced into England by the Normans, *Anglo-normand*, had been a rough rural dialect from the beginning and by this time it sounded so strange to sophisticated ears that the aristocratic English refused to speak it; they learned the French of France instead, or spoke English. In 1272, when Edward I became king while he was fighting in the Holy Land, he decided that the royal Court would now use the English language. This effectively eliminated French as an everyday means of social communication or literary

expression in England. From the end of the 13th century, English and Latin were the two official languages.

It was soon after this, in the very early 14th century, that the Parliament was divided into the House of Lords, which included bishops, and the House of Commons. This was not yet democracy, since the role of the Parliament was to advise the king, not to make laws or debate policy, and there were no open elections. But the need to articulate power corresponding to the interests of the whole of society was by now perceived. Always there was tension between the rights and claims of the king, the barons, the Church, and the ordinary people. This same tension underlay the much later events of the Civil War (1640) and the Glorious Revolution (1688).

The rise of towns was slow. From the beginning London was central, with various royal palaces including one outside the walls to the West, next to the Abbey at Westminster, and the massive Tower of London built by William beside the Thames to the East. But the kings were often absent, in France or in other royal houses. Since most centralized power was exercised by the officers of the king, in the king's name, the Court was the place that people went to in search of justice; at the same time a national Exchequer was set up, to keep accounts of royal wealth, and until the time of the Tudors a large part of the money raised by taxes and fines was kept in boxes in the royal bedroom. From there it often went to pay military expenses.

The Universities

Towns were often more significant than their size would suggest. When scholars began to gather in Oxford in the 12th century, as an alternative to going to study philosophy and theology in Paris, or law and medicine in Bologna in Italy, they found only a small market-town in which to rent rooms in the same house as a master, who taught them. The Universities as full organizations only appeared in the 13th century, and the Colleges were founded after that. Those going to Cambridge a few years later found something even smaller.

The European universities arose out of the Church school system, and were marked by the great freedom with which students and masters moved from place to place. The twelfth century Renaissance actually began with a new interest in "humanistic" studies in Italy in the 10th century. The 12th century, however, saw one of the greatest moments of change in European thought. In the schools, especially those in Paris, philosophy grew up into an independent discipline that the Church struggled in vain to control. One of the most famous names is that of Peter Abelard (1079-1142) whose classes in Paris were enormously popular. He was essentially a dialectician, and the central debate at this time was that between Nominalism (claiming that universals and abstract concepts are only words) and Realism (insisting that universals have absolute existence), out of which emerged the 13th century systematic philosophy and theology based on Aristotle, often known as Scholasticism.

In the later twelfth century, the method of debate and study in the schools was transformed by contact with an entirely new intellectual universe. Translators began to produce Latin versions of the writings of Aristotle, together with the works of Islamic and Jewish thinkers influenced by him. Translations were made from Greek, which until then had been unknown in Western Europe, and from Arabic, thanks to a translation center established at Toledo in Spain, while other scholars worked in Italy and Constantinople, which only fell to the Turks in 1453. This totally changed the way in which fundamental questions were seen and also made it possible for the first time for questions about scientific theory to be debated.

The works of Aristotle, in particular, together with the Arab medical and mathematical texts, meant that the amount of detailed knowledge available increased beyond all measure.

The Church

In the Church, too, this is a time of revolutionary change. For centuries, the highest form of Christian life had been considered to be the monastic life, retreat from the world into a life of prayer. In the early 12th century Bernard of Clairvaux gave up his noble inheritance and became a monk, together with many of his high class companions. He stressed the need for austerity of life in the monasteries and first joined others at Citeaux before founding the Cistercian monastery at Clairvaux which had a vast influence throughout Europe by the complete simplicity of its architectural and spiritual style. St Bernard introduced into European Christianity a new emotional warmth in devotion to the humanity of Jesus and to his mother Mary, that still remains alive.

In England some people, especially women, felt called to enclose themselves permanently in little huts built against church walls, and spend all their time in prayer, either alone or a few together. For those who could not live the hard farming life of the Cistercians this was quite popular, and one of the oldest texts in Middle English is a rule of life for three such anchorites, called Ancrene Wisse, or Ancrene Riwle, the earliest version of which dates from about 1200 and is much studied for its historical and linguistic interest.

The new social order that was now arising among the citizens of towns, though, demanded a new religious approach, and at the end of the 12th century two great men were born, one in Spain and one in Italy: Dominic (1170-1221) (after his death Saint Dominic) became the founder of a group known as the Friars Preachers or Dominicans, and Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) (Saint Francis) founded the Friars Minor (little brothers) or Franciscans. St Dominic was concerned to bring a much higher level of education and thought into the presentation of the Gospel in sermons than could be found in ordinary parish churches.

Francis is for many people the closest anyone has come to the true spirit of Christ, in his simplicity, poverty, and joy. When the first group of Franciscans arrived in England around 1225, people remarked that they were always laughing. Both of these groups concentrated on bringing the Gospel to the people of the towns, living in convents built among the houses and without the vast farm estates of the rural monasteries. By the fourteenth century, though, they had lost their first freshness and had become Mendicant orders (begging as a sign of poverty had changed into an endless quest for money) and Chaucer is not the first to attack the Friars for their corruption.

In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council, a meeting of bishops held in Rome, ordered that all adults were to make a confession of their sins before a priest at least once a year. Until then the Sacrament of Confession had been practiced only by specially sincere Christians. If a person did not receive the priest's Absolution (declaration of God's forgiveness), they could not receive Holy Communion and to die unshriven was thought to be very dangerous for the soul.

There were two major consequences of this generalization of Confession: it gave the clergy much more power of control over the ordinary laity in the details of their private lives, and it obliged the Church to provide the clergy with manuals of detailed instructions on how to evaluate the seriousness of various sinful actions. The production of such guide-books to sin, coming in the scientific revolution of the 13th century, provoked the birth of what today is known as moral psychology.

In 1225 a son was born to the Count of Aquino, near Naples, Thomas Aquinas became one of Europe's intellectual giants whose importance continues in diminished form

into the present. Aquinas became a Dominican in 1244, and went to study in Cologne under the great German philosopher Albert the Great, known as *Doctor universalis*. In 1252 he went to Paris, where he became a professor in 1257. From 1260 he went and taught in Italy, before returning to Paris in 1269. The last years of his life he spent at Naples, dying suddenly in 1274. His main work is named *Summa theologiae*, a huge work filling many volumes and not finally completed. Aquinas is sometimes known as *Doctor Angelicus*, although in school his nickname was Dumb Ox.

Aquinas was convinced that in the many works of Aristotle translated into Latin in his lifetime he could find very much that was true; there were other true things elsewhere, of course, but he saw how much Aristotle could contribute to human understanding. There is a Physics, an Ethics, and a Metaphysics in the *Summa*, which is part of the 13th century's general effort to come to a synthetic vision encompassing the whole system of things. In his time, Aquinas was a controversial figure and the *Summa* was intended for use in a climate of intense but precise questioning, rather than as a text-book of pure orthodoxy. The intellectual tradition to which he belonged has long been known as Scholasticism and was the object of fierce attack at the Renaissance.

The development of narrative literature

Geoffrey of Monmouth

In the period before 1066, in every land memories of historical characters (Attila, Hrothgar, Finn...) were transformed into tales, stories that were no longer pure history but the result of a creative fantasy working in the interests of a broader lesson, or of entertainment. The link between this transformation, and the act of writing is less clear; but certainly the permanence of a written text, one that would never have to be memorized, opened the way for new developments in length and complexity.

At the beginning of the 12th century, there is a clear thirst for poetry and fictional narratives of a much higher level of symbolic sophistication and psychological complexity than the old heroic forms, particularly among the highest classes in the various courts of France. It is a strange fact that just when England was lying prostrate, culturally, under the French-speaking Normans who had no literary culture of their own, stories from the Celtic lands of Wales and Brittany that had ancient Britain as their setting conquered France and Germany and became the great myths of the Middle Ages, only returning to England by way of translation and later adaptation.

In 1136 a Welsh cleric, Geoffrey of Monmouth, wrote his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain), a Latin prose work about legendary kings of Britain including King Arthur. His material was partly the chronicles of British history preserved in Wales (Nennius) and Bede, but much came from his imagination, or from the oral developments of stories about Arthur and others that have not survived in written form. This became a very popular work, in France as much as in England; more than 180 manuscripts of it still survive and it was translated into French several times.

The historical importance of Geoffrey's work is incalculable; he introduces into writing some of the major stories of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. He is the first to link the British people with Troy by making their founder a great-grandson of Aeneas, Brutus or Brut (whence the name Britain), and the first Britons groups of Trojan refugees accompanying him. He claims that the original name of London was Troynovant. He tells the story of King Lear, his daughters Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia, the love-question and the division of the kingdom. He also first tells the stories of Gorboduc, and of Cymbeline.

Above all, he introduces the heroic figure of Arthur into European literature, in a strange story that begins with the magic of Merlin enabling Arthur's father Utherpendragon to beget Arthur with another man's wife, disguised as her husband. Arthur becomes a great leader of the British, setting out to attack Rome in company with the knights Gawain, his cousin, with Bedevere, and Kay. Finally, Mordred, who has had an adulterous relationship with Arthur's Queen, Guinevere, rebels and is killed in a terrible battle where, Geoffrey says, "Arthur himself, our renowned king, was mortally wounded and was carried off to the Isle of Avalon, so that his wounds might be attended to."

In 1155 a Norman called Wace completed a French verse version of Geoffrey's story, *Le Roman de Brut*, dedicated to Eleanor of Aquitaine. He added greatly to the romantic detail of his original; it is he, for example, who first introduces the story of the Round Table. Here Arthur has already become the model of chivalry and of *courtesie* by which is meant all the ideal qualities required of the noble warrior in his dealings with the world.

Layamon's *Brut*

Some time before the end of the century, a priest living in the West of England, calling himself Layamon (Lawman), wrote an English version of Wace's work, the Brut, which is the first major work written in the simpler grammatical form of English known as Middle English. The metrical form is a sign that the short half-line of Old English tradition had continued, although the alliteration is no longer regular. It is preserved in two 13th century manuscripts, and this is interpreted as a sign of its popularity.

From Layamon's *Brut* (the departure of Arthur)

'And ich wulle varen to Avalun   to vairest alre maidene
to Argante there quene   alven swithe sceone
and heo scal mine wunden   makien all isunde,
al hal me makien   mid haleweiye drenchen.
And seothe ich cumen wulle   to mine kineriche
and wunien mid Brutten   mid muchelere wunne.'
Aefne than worden   ther com of se wenden
that wes an sceort bat lithen   sceoven mid uthen
and twa wimmen ther-inne   wunderliche idihte
and heo nomen Arthur anan   and aneouste hine vereden
and softe hine adun leiden   and forth gunnen lithen.
Tha wes hit iwurthen   that Merlin seide whilen
that weore uni-mete care   of Arthures forth-fare.
Bruttes ileveth yete   that he bon on live
and wunnien in Avalun   mid fairest alre alven
and lokieth evere Bruttes yete   what Arthur cumen lithe.

('And I will journey to Avalon to the fairest of all women
to Argante the queen of the place, that most lovely elf,
and she will make my wounds quite whole,
heal me completely, anointing with balms
and then I will come to my kingdom
and dwell with the British in great happiness.'
Just then there arrived from the sea

a small boat travelling driven by the waves
with two women in it strangely dressed.
They took Arthur at once and bore him
and laid him down softly and then travelled away.
Thus was fulfilled what Merlin had spoken before,
that there would be immense sorrow for Arthur's parting.
The British still believe that he is alive
and dwells in Avalon with the fairest of elves
and the British still expect Arthur to return again.)

Fine amor

The people frequenting the courts of the lords and kings ruling the various parts of what is now called France were not very educated, very moral, or very religious. In the southern part of France, known as Provence, particularly, contact with the refinements of Byzantium and the Moorish kingdom of Spain and North Africa only made the lack of sophistication more apparent. The Normans ruling Sicily experienced similar feelings. Those other worlds showed how barbarous the Northern peoples were, and invited exploration of the more physical pleasures of life in a material luxury unknown in Western Christendom. For it was certain that medieval Christianity had little sympathy for sexuality in any form, for sensuality even less, and therefore was without great influence on people living in a culture where the women had begun to be as powerful and self-willed as the men.

In *Beowulf*, Hrothgar has a wife, who is scarcely feminine in any real sense. She plays no role in the action, but pours drinks for the men and gives gifts. The literature of the high Middle Ages begins with the discovery of the difficulties that intense personal relationships between men and women can cause, especially when the people involved are married to others, or are not social equals. These difficulties are first of all psychological: falling in love is experienced as a crisis demanding a new self-knowledge, and provoking deep introspection. At the same time, there is conflict between individual desire and social obligation, especially when one is in love with the wife of one's feudal lord.

The first known explorer of these themes in verse was Eleanor of Aquitaine's grandfather, Guilhem IX (1071-1127), whose main capital was in Poitiers. His language was the southern French dialect known as *langue d'oc* (*oc* means yes) as opposed to the northern dialects, including Norman, *langue d'oil* (modern French *oui* also means yes). Like others who had contact with the Saracen (Moorish) world, he came into sharp conflict with Christian morality in his relations with women; he kept a whole harem of Saracen girls, and some of his poems are about sex in a rather brutal way.

It is hard to know how he came to be a poet, at a time when the professional entertainers and singers, the *troubadours*, were of low social rank. Scholars disagree about the Moorish influence from Spain. Some believe that the very word **troubadour** has Arabic roots, although it looks as if it derives from *trouver* (the French for find). Among his poems, though, there are a number which have had enormous influence on the literature of love. The tension between personal passion and social duties is solved by having the male idealize the woman, raising her to a very high level in the feudal system and calling her *mi dons*, "my lord". The man, no matter his rank, becomes a serf of the lady, and his service is expressed by his way of acting in society. He cultivates the highest forms of *courtoisie* such as *valor* (moral value), youthful elegance, joy, and self-discipline. All of this calls for people's admiration, provokes praise for his qualities, which thus becomes praise of his Lady since he is doing it all for her.

Another aspect of the relationship, though, adds drama. The two persons are not married and cannot marry. This is partly because high class persons of the period married diplomatically, not for love; and partly because the *troubadour* performing the song is often a minstrel, or a lower-class secretary, while the lady is always of a higher class. It was this difficulty which most intrigued the poets (who were often of a higher class than the lowlier *troubadours* who performed their work); love was impossible, unless the two committed adultery. If they did, secrecy was obviously essential; but even if they did not, secrecy was still essential, because they would arouse suspicion. There could be almost no direct communication, the lady could not be exposed to shame or disgrace.

The result was a pseudo-religion, with the lady physically completely inaccessible but inspiring in her servant a passionate adoration and an ardent desire to live entirely for her glory. The sexual ambiguities present in the Provencal poems soon disappeared in the more pragmatic northern areas; the system became a code, best known as *fine amor* although in many books it is called **courtly love**.

The most famous troubadours after Guilhem IX were Bertrand de Born and Bernard de Ventadour, both of whom were active at the courts of Eleanor of Aquitaine. Their poems are short lyrics of intense feeling, written in very sophisticated verse-forms involving complex patterns of rhythm and rime. Their work spread across Europe, influencing Dante and Petrarch. At the same time, interest in the psychology of love gave rise to a quite different kind of writing, the narrative verse **Romance** which was to develop until it gave birth to the modern novel.

The great verse romances written in French in the twelfth century were transformed into prose romances in the thirteenth century. They had a variety of sources for their stories, and this is reflected in the settings. It has been customary to classify the different romances by their subject-matter (Matter): Britain, Antiquity, France, England. The first group includes the Arthurian tales and the Tristan story; the second group is set in ancient Greece and Rome and is based on the Latin classics; the third group is based on the older French *chansons de geste* with heroes such as Charlemagne. The matter of England includes the tales of Havelok and Horn, that seem to have Scandinavian connections.

The Matter of Britain

Tristan and Iseult

In 1135 a Welsh or Breton Celtic *jongleur* or *trouvère* (teller of tales and entertainer) was at the Poitiers court. We do not know what tales he told, but from this time on people in France knew about the love of **Tristan and Iseult**. The basic narrative material is clearly of Celtic origin, similar to some of the Irish stories about Finn. Tristan is serving his uncle King Mark of Cornwall, and is sent to bring back his uncle's bride, the princess Iseult from Ireland. Iseult's mother has prepared a magic love potion for the newly-married couple to drink so that they will be happy. Unfortunately, Tristan and Iseult drink the potion during the sea journey and fall helplessly, desperately in love.

The rest of the poems about them tell of the results of their passion. They cannot live apart, so they take refuge in the forests, where the king finds them asleep together in a cave. They try to return to society, where their duties lie, but their relationship is impossible there, while they also cannot free themselves from this love-passion, of which the potion is more a symbol than a cause. In the end, there is no solution and after separations and reunions, they are only really united when plants grow from their separate graves and twine together.

This story was told several times in poems written in France in the 12th century, none of which survives complete, then it was marvelously translated into German by Gottfried von Strassbourg around 1210, but left incomplete. In the later 13th century, the story was expanded in France into one of the huge prose romances that were so popular then, bringing Tristan into the Arthurian cycle. In England the only version of the story is that written by Malory in the 15th century, based on the French prose romance.

Marie de France

As her name suggests, **Marie de France** was a Frenchwoman who lived in England. Nothing is known about the biography of this very exceptional woman writer but between 1160-70 she wrote a series of short (mostly under 1000 lines) narrative poems she called Breton *lais*, claiming they were stories sung by Celtic minstrels. They are mostly about love and the adventures it provokes, and several of them contain magic elements; certain of them are linked with the court of Arthur, showing that by this time the Arthurian stories of Geoffrey were familiar everywhere. They are simply told, without surprise at the strangeness of the *faerie* elements which are treated as normal.

In *Lanval* a knight has a fairy mistress that he alone sees; he has sworn never to tell anyone of her existence. But at the court of Arthur, Queen Guinevere shows a strong interest in this knight, so he at last repulses her by saying that he has a far more beautiful lady as his love. He fears that he has now lost his fairy, having broken his word (in a knight this is a great offense against honor) but she understands that he is defending their love, forgives him, and reveals herself to the court to vindicate his words. In most of Marie's stories, love is vindicated in the end, and although adultery or murder may be involved, in most stories love leads to marriage.

Chrétien de Troyes

One of the most important writers in the whole history of Western fiction is **Chrétien de Troyes**, who between 1170 and 1190 wrote five long narrative poems which are usually called *romans courtois* (courtly romances), or *romans bretons* (Brittany/British romances). The French word *roman* originally designated the vernacular language that had evolved from Latin; the word then came to designate any story told in that vernacular, as opposed to serious literature written in Latin. Almost all the long narratives described in this chapter refer to themselves as *romans*, which a little later became the English word romance. The French word for the modern novel is also *roman*; in English there is no longer a literary genre known as romance because of the confusions with other uses of the word romance.

One of Chrétien's patrons was Marie of Champagne, whose court was at Troyes. She was a daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine, and similar to her mother in her vitality and her interest in literary novelty. Chrétien's five romances are *Erec, Cligès, Lancelot, Yvain*, and *Perceval*. They are written in four-stress couplets, like all the French poems mentioned in this section, but despite the limitations of this form, they are extremely sensitive analyses of complex psychological responses, as well as fascinating narratives.

Scholars have mostly tried to determine how much in the stories came from Celtic sources (Chrétien was not a Breton), in vain. It looks as though Chrétien heard stories, but composed his own romances. The romances *Erec*, *Cligès*, and *Yvain*, are concerned with the conflicts between the private demands of love and the public duties of a knight. In *Erec*, the narrative represents the growth of a mature relationship between the young lovers who meet

unexpectedly in the first part, and are married without knowing each other. The central story has Erec overhearing his new wife Enide blaming herself for Erec's neglect of his social duties. He orders her to go with him on a quest, to show her that he is brave, but to keep silence. In various adventures she breaks her promise to warn him of danger, which he then overcomes. In this way they come to complete mutual trust, and the discovery that a woman's love ennobles and inspires her husband.

The most influential works, though, are *Lancelot* and *Perceval*. It seems that Chrétien was the first writer to mention Lancelot, who in France was to displace Gawain as the central figure. The romance bearing his name was commissioned by Marie of Champagne, and Chrétien allowed another poet to complete it, perhaps unhappy with the material.

Lancelot is in love with Guinevere but they are separated, the Queen having been kidnapped into a strange, other-world that can only be reached over a sword-bridge or an underwater bridge. He and Gawain both try to rescue her and Lancelot is inspired by his love to persevere. At last, after a dramatic conflict, Guinevere invites Lancelot to come to her; he breaks through the bars of her window and they are united in an adulterous liaison. Guinevere exercises total domination over Lancelot, ordering him to humiliate himself in various ways as she tests his submission to her will. Since Arthur remains unaware of their love until the end of the story, it is never clear whether the adultery is considered morally justified or not.

In all these stories there are mysterious episodes which verge on the supernatural; the structure is firm, but episodic in the linkage of multiple adventures. Chrétien is a master in combining the adventures of folklore with the more sophisticated concerns of love-psychology and social morality.

In writing his last poem, *Perceval* (also called the *Conte del Graal*), he clearly began by drawing on mysterious Celtic tales but again he transformed them. One reason for the fascination of *Perceval* is the fact that it was left unfinished after enough had been written (9000 lines) to provoke intense curiosity, and it was duly continued by six later poets, who added some 70,000 more lines. In Germany, the *Minnesinger* (German love poet) Wolfram von Eschenbach wrote a magnificent version of the story, *Parzifal*.

Perceval grows up with his mother away from society, of which he knows nothing. He is therefore completely naive when he sets out in quest of the man who killed his father. Yet by inborn skills he becomes a knight, succeeds in his revenge, marries, and returns to his mother. During his journeys he comes to a castle in which he witnesses a strange procession centred on a mysterious *graal* (a cup) full of light, and a bleeding lance, but he has been told not to ask questions, so he does not enquire as to the meaning of these things. Later he is told that this was a terrible fault, since if he had asked, he would have healed the wounded Fisher-king whose castle it was, and restored the kingdom. He sets out, then, in quest of the Graal, and the story breaks off inconclusively.

Arthurian Romance after Chrétien

In all Chrétien's romances there is tension and conflict between reality and aspiration, reason and emotion. The settings are richly suggestive of symbolic and mythic dimensions but these are not specifically developed and defined. The Graal fascinated Chrétien's contemporaries by the way it offered a concrete yet mysterious symbol of the unseen Absolute in life that many knights were looking for. There was a strong idealistic longing, perhaps, among people who saw a world dominated by self-interest and harshness. If Christ said "Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven," what could that mean for men whose business was ruling and fighting? In stories like that of Lancelot they could recognize the usual pattern of

human life, in which fleshly passions, ambition, and human weakness bring about social confusion and personal failure.

It is typical of Chrétien's narrative method that his Graal remains unexplained; the later poets identified it with the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper, giving it a religious signification. This inspired **Robert de Boron** to expand the *Perceval* by writing in about 1202 a historical poem in French, *Joseph d'Arimathie*, that traced the earlier fortunes of the Grail (the usual English spelling), telling how Joseph of Arimathea (who in the Gospels arranges for the burial of Jesus) lived for years in a prison nourished by the Grail. Later this Grail was brought to Glastonbury, along with a table like that of the Last Supper. Glastonbury was a major monastery in which Henry II had arranged the discovery, in 1180, of the bones of Arthur and Guinevere; it was therefore identified with Avalon.

Then Robert de Boron wrote a poem about *Merlin* inspired by Geoffrey of Monmouth, Merlin being half-demon, half-human, sent by the devils to mislead humanity by false prophecies but instead helping Uther Pendragon to found the Round Table and assisting him in the begetting of Arthur. These two poems then formed a prelude to his rewriting of the *Perceval* that has not survived.

Some years later, perhaps around 1220, unknown writers transformed all these poems into a single great French prose romance-cycle, the Lancelot-Grail prose cycle or the *Vulgate cycle*. The *Estoire del Saint Graal* telling the Joseph story, and the *Estoire de Merlin* telling that of Merlin, are followed by the *Lancelot*, in which the story of his liaison with Guinevere from Chrétien is combined with many other youthful adventures. Then comes a new work, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, including elements of the *Perceval* but with a new hero, Galahad. **Galahad** is Lancelot's son, his mother the daughter of the Fisher-king of the Grail Castle. He is destined to achieve the Grail which all the other knights, including Lancelot and Perceval, cannot do because of their sins. Galahad is a virgin, pure of sexual sin and a man of spirituality. Finally, while the others fail, Lancelot last of all, Perceval is admitted to the Grail Supper, and Christ himself feeds him with the Sacrament from the Grail. Galahad is then able to anoint the wounded Fisher-king with the blood from the bleeding lance, and he is healed. Galahad soon after this dies, his life's meaning having been accomplished. This work was probably written in a Cistercian monastery.

Finally, the cycle ends with *La Mort le Roi Artu*; we are brought back to the tragic story told by Geoffrey and Wace. Lancelot's adultery causes division among the Round Table knights, Arthur discovers it just when he needs his help most, Mordred's treachery is decisive and in the final battle all die, Arthur being carried away to Avalon. It is all told in the tones of high tragedy, close in some ways to the elegiac note at the end of *Beowulf*, for it shows the loss of an ideal social world in which men were able to give the best of themselves in service of their king, their lady, and their Lord.

In England, those with the education and the spare time needed to read the thousands of pages these prose romances occupy, and the money to buy a copy, were quite able to read French! So until Malory undertook his task in the 15th century, we find only minor adaptations of parts of the Arthurian cycle. The best of these is certainly the alliterative *Morte Arthure* of the 14th century, and the independent story with an Arthurian setting, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

In recent years the literary interest of these first works of prose-fiction has been rediscovered; using a vast crowd of characters the prose-romances tell their stories in a multitude of interlinked episodes, each quest interlacing with others, being interrupted by a new incident or by narratorial commentary in a highly sophisticated narratorial technique that no English writer, not even Malory, ever paralleled; the structure of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is closest we get to this, and it derives from Ariosto's use of interlacing techniques in his *Orlando Furioso*.

The Matter of Rome and Antiquity

Le Roman d'Eneas

In about 1160, before the development of Arthurian romance, an unknown poet wrote a French version of Virgil's *Aeneid*, *Le Roman d'Eneas*. The main centre of his interest lies in two love stories, the first the tragic love between Dido and Aeneas, in which the poet sees an example of uncontrolled passion unable to take account of the demands of social duty. The second is the story of Lavinia's love for Aeneas, and it is the origin of much of the Middle Age's love literature. Lavinia declares that she is not interested in love; almost at once, as she watches Aeneas ride by from her window, Cupid's arrow strikes her and she falls desperately in love. Her dilemma is first one of self-knowledge, understanding what is happening, then of communication of her feelings to her mother, next comes anxiety as to whether Aeneas can feel the same about her. Finally she breaks with social convention in order to tell Aeneas of her feelings.

The origin of the love psychology found here is in Ovid, the *Ars amatoria* and the *Remedia amoris* furnishing much of the language of love-sickness, the *Metamorphoses* giving models of female introspection and love-analysis. The same Ovidian texts were soon afterwards the inspiration for a Latin treatise *De Amore* written for Marie of Champagne by Andreas Capellanus, in which he tries to codify the exercise of *fine amor*.

Le Roman de Troie

The Latin-reading Middle Ages knew nothing of Homer except perhaps his name. Thanks to Virgil, sympathy lay with the Trojans, especially after Geoffrey showed that they had founded Britain. The stories of the Trojan war were known through Latin versions of late Greek romances of the 4-6th centuries, one bearing the name of Dictys, who claimed to have been a Cretan on the Greek side at Troy, and the other Dares, a Trojan ally. Their works claim to be eye-witness records of the siege and defeat of Troy, and were very popular, under the joint name of **Dares and Dictys**.

In about 1165, **Benoit de Sainte-Maure** of northern France used them to inspire his *Roman de Troie*, a poem of some 30,000 lines dedicated to Eleanor of Aquitaine. It is work of tremendous fantasy, converting the warriors of antiquity into feudal knights in castles, fighting on horseback in armour, believing in God. Hector is loved, interestingly enough, by Morgan le fay, Arthur's sister (cf *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), who gives him a magic horse. He is the very model of heroic knighthood and courtesy. Luxurious descriptions evoke exotic lands quite unlike western Europe.

There are twenty-two battles, and four famous love-affairs: that of Helen and Paris (they are treated as a married couple), Medea's desertion of Jason, Briseida parted from Troilus and seduced by Diomedes, Polyxena of Troy wooed by the Greek hero Achilles. The story of Troilus seems to have been invented by Benoit, it was to pass through Boccaccio before becoming the material for Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. In the *Roman de Troie*, again, all these love matches are the cause of endless inner monologues, full of self-analysis, of torment, doubt, and conflict between love and social duty. Benoit's poem was popular throughout Europe until the 17th century.

In 1287 an Italian, **Guido de Columnis**, rewrote his poem into Latin prose as the *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, and this became even more popular, being translated into all the main European languages. In England it gave the *Gest Historiale of the Destruction of*

Troy in the 14th century, a fine alliterative poem of over 14,000 long lines; then, around 1415, John Lydgate took 30,000 lines to tell the same tale in his *Troy Book*.

Le Roman de Thebes

The Greek legends involving the city of Thebes, especially the tragic story of Polynices and Eteocles, the deaths of all the heroes during the siege (the story of *Seven against Thebes*), and the destruction of the city, were known to the Middle Ages through the *Thebaid*, a Latin epic in twelve books by the Roman poet Statius completed in the year 92. Around 1150 these stories were combined with that of Oedipus (who has no part in the *Thebaid*) in the 10,000 line *Roman de Thebes* which again combines a large number of battles with some newly invented love-affairs. It was the main source of knowledge about the stories of Greek antiquity, together with the *Roman de Troie*. It was expanded into a prose romance in the 13th century, and this was translated into English verse around 1420, also by John Lydgate.

Alexandre le Grand

It is not surprising that the French, with their great interest in military heroism, should have given themselves a poem about Alexander before ever *fine amor* became central. Soon after 1100 a poet called Alberic adapted older Latin poems in a simple, heroic style. At the end of the 12th century, various poets produced another version of the story, using lines of twelve syllables which for this reason have ever since been called Alexandrines. The poem shows a great interest in techniques of visual description, especially of luxurious interiors and exotic scenes, while Alexander himself has become an ideal prince of chivalry, full of generosity and high-mindedness. In England various Latin poems gave rise to various English versions: *The Wars of Alexander* and *Kyng Alisaunder*, and others, all showing the appeal this matter had until the Renaissance.

The Matter of France

The oldest narrative poems in France are heroic epics which begin to be written down around 1100, but which were transmitted and developed in oral tradition over the centuries before that. As in Northern Europe, the central heroes of these *chansons de geste* (songs of historical acts) were actual historical figures. The stories told about them, though, have little or nothing to do with historical reality. The oldest of these epics are written in free stanzas of varying length where each ten-syllable line ends in the same vowel-sound (assonance). Almost a hundred of these poems exist, they were written and revised throughout the Middle Ages in France and also enjoyed popularity in parts of Italy, some were translated into German. In England few of them seem to have been translated or adapted.

The *chansons de geste* are mostly marked by memories of the time when southern France was in danger of conquest by the Moors from Islamic Spain. Charlemagne led a number of campaigns against the Moors around 780, and he is the central figure in many of the poems. Yet it is one of the strange features of this genre that Charlemagne is often shown as a powerless old man, despised or ignored by his vassal lords who quarrel among themselves. The picture of the pagans against whom the noble Christians fight is not very

close to reality, since they are shown worshipping a trinity of idols, one of whom is Mahomet. In most of the works women have the same kind of role as they have in *Beowulf*.

These epic poems, then, have an oral pre-history which has fascinated the critics since the 19th century, in the same way as critics of Homer have tried to imagine the primitive scene where a poem is at time imagined to arise collectively from the People, perhaps along the pilgrimage routes. Normally, these poems were recited to a musical accompaniment by professional entertainers (*jongleurs*) and the actual composer of the work was called a *trouvère*, he might also be a reciter. A number of the *chansons de geste* certainly transcribe oral poems of great antiquity, but by the later 12th century this has become a literary genre, and many new epics were from the beginning composed as written texts, rewriting the more primitive works or inventing new episodes with the same heroes.

The Song of Roland

La Chanson de Roland is one of the great works of European literature. It exists in a single, 12th century manuscript now in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, originally copied in England. Everything suggests that it is the oldest *chanson de geste* that has survived, the same story is told in other later versions found in France and Italy, and it was translated into German and Old Norse at an early date. It is a story that deals uniquely with the world of military action, its main themes are heroic valour, and betrayal.

Charlemagne has been seven years in Spain, with Roland his nephew and most valiant warrior. Now only the pagan king Marsile of Saragossa is unconquered. He sends an offer of surrender that Roland finds suspicious, he recommends they go on fighting. His step-father Ganelon speaks against this, a sign of hostility. Roland offers to go to Saragossa to negotiate the surrender but Charlemagne cannot risk losing him, Roland suggests that Ganelon should go on the dangerous mission. Resenting this, Ganelon suggests to Marsile that he should attack the rear-guard of the French army as it leaves Spain, since both of them want Roland to die.

On his return to the army, Ganelon suggests that Roland lead the rear-guard. When they reach the passage through the Pyrenees called Roncevaux, Roland's companion Oliver sees the pagan army approaching and invites Roland to blow his famous horn, so that the main French army will return. In pride, Roland refuses until only sixty men are left alive. Then he blows it so hard that the effort kills him, when Charlemagne returns none remain alive. Charlemagne defeats Marsile, and a whole new army led by Baligant from Babylon, before he can mourn for Roland and his peers. Later Roland's fiancée Aude, Oliver's sister, hears of his death, collapses and dies. Ganelon is found guilty of treason and is executed by being torn apart by wild horses.

What most appeals to modern readers is the austere formalism of this epic. There are long speeches in high tone, there is the pathos of the hero's lonely death and the laments of his 200-year old uncle at the end. The whole poem only covers about 4000 lines and it is clearly the work of a master-poet who has given it a tight thematic unity. Above all, there is a tension between the admirable heroic aspects of Roland's behaviour and the very human pride which in the end leads to disaster and death.

The Matter of England

It is always a cause of some regret for the English that, while Greek narrative literature begins with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, German with the *Nibelungenlied*, French with the *Chanson de Roland* and so many other fine things, there is nothing of similar interest

in England unless you go back to *Beowulf*, whose language is not recognizably English! We may read over a hundred romances written in Middle English during the medieval period, but very few of them will strike us by any trace of great literary talent.

King Horn

The oldest Middle English narrative after Layamon's *Brut*, *King Horn* dates from around 1225 and the same story was told in French some fifty years earlier. The first English stories are closer to folk-tale than to *roman courtois*, although there is a link in that courts form the setting and knighthood and marriage the goal in both.

The style is close to oral presentation, short lines from the Old English tradition now being united into French-style couplets by rhyme:

Alle beon hi blithe   that to my song lithe!   (*happy, listen*)
A song ich shall you singe   of Murry the Kinge.
Kinge he was biweste   so longe so hit laste.   (*in the west*)
Godhild het his quen   faire ne mighte non ben.
He hadde a sone that het Horn   Fairer ne mighte non beo born,
Ne no rain upon birine   ne sunne upon bishine.
Fairer nis none thane he was   he was bright so the glas,
He was whit so the flur   rose-red was his colur
He was fair and eke bold   and of fiftene winter old.

Horn is kidnapped in childhood by Saracen pirates who kill his father and set him adrift in a boat that arrives in Westernesse where later the king's daughter, Rymenhild, falls in love with him:

'Horn' heo sede, 'withute strif thou shalt have me to thy wif.
Horn have of me rewthe   and plist me thy trewthe.'
Horn tho him bithoghte   what he speke mighte.
'Christ' quath he, 'thee wisse,   and give thee hevene blisse
Of thine husebonde, wher he beo in londe....

He arranges to be knighted, in order to be worthy of her, but then he is betrayed by a false companion, Fikenild. He is banished to Ireland, where he kills the Saracen giant who killed his father, He is offered the king's daughter as bride, but refuses because he has promised his love to Rymenhild. He hears that she is being forced to marry a king, so he returns in disguise and kills the suitor, reveals himself to Rymenhild, then leaves to win back his own kingdom. Fikenild tries to force Rymenhild to marry him, but Horn has a dream warning him of it, so he returns disguised as a minstrel, kills Fikenild and makes his companions kings before settling in his father's land with Rymenhild:

Rymenhild he makede his queene   so it mighte well beon.
All folk them mighte rewe   that loved them so true.
Now been they bothe dede   Christ to heaven them lede!

The story is of no particular literary interest, it may seem. Yet it offers a fine example of a basic folk-tale motif called exile-and-return and the form is that of the multiple-move story, in which the same kind of adventure is repeated several times in different places. The

initial foundling-story is combined with revenge motifs, and the story of the disguises Horn adopts in his return to Rymenhild is obviously paralleled by the events of the return of Ulysses in the *Odyssey*. The study of folk-tale motifs has taken on new interest in the light of the approaches to Romance found in theoreticians such as the Russian Formalists. The style of *Horn* is sparse and inelegant, but the story of insecurity and treachery, with the final triumph of the good, may best be read as a saga in which motifs are more important than motives.

Havelok the Dane

Similar to *Horn* in many ways, but later (1275?), and much longer (3000 lines), is *Havelok*. Both heroes were celebrated in French as well as in English, both stories are about royal children who grow up in ignorance of their identity but finally overcome wicked traitors and become noble kings. The legends about Havelok and his step-father fisherman Grim were developed in East Anglia and Yorkshire; some critics have seen in these stories popular romances that arose away from the aristocratic milieux that were fond of more elegant kinds of romance but there is no evidence to support this.

Havelok is today the most often read of the early romances, because it is well-written, fast-moving in its action, and not without humour. In the only manuscript it begins in the style of a tale told to an audience by a minstrel:

Herkeneth to me, gode men.
Wives, maidnes, and alle men,
Of a tale that ich you wile telle,
Who-so it wile here and ther-to dwelle.
The tale is of Havelok y-maked;
Whil he was litel, he yede full naked.
Havelok was a full good gome...

It is written, not in corrupted forms of Old English verse, but in octosyllabic tetrameter with an iambic beat similar to the French romances. The material may have some link with English-Danish history but the main motifs are closer to folk-tale or romance. At the beginning, the good kings of England and Denmark die, leaving infant heirs who both fall into the hands of wicked men. Goldborough, the true Queen of England, becomes the captive of Godrich, and the baby Havelok is given by Godard to a fisherman Grim to be killed. But Grim is a good man, so he escapes to England (where he gives his name to the town of Grimsby) together with the boy, who grows up and becomes a servant in Godrich's castle when Grim can no longer feed him. Havelok is immensely strong, and has a huge appetite. He is the type of the gentle giant:

Evere he was glad and blithe,
His sorrwe he couthe full well mithe.   (*hide*)
It was non so litel knave
For to leiken ne forto plawe
That he ne wolde with him pleye...
Him loveden all, still and bolde,
Knightes, children, yunge and olde.

He receives Goldborough as bride, Godrich seeing this as a way of humiliating her because he had promised her father she should marry the strongest man in the kingdom. They go to live with Grim and his family; but Havelok has royal blood, so that a mysterious light shines from his mouth when he is asleep, that Goldborough sees and a dream interprets. Suddenly Havelok remembers who he really is; he invades Denmark with Grim's sons, although he knows nothing of warfare. His natural strength is enough, he soon conquers Godard and gains his kingdom, then he returns to England, where he fights and defeats Godrich. The kingdom is restored to Goldborough, Grim's daughters marry noblemen, and all Havelok's fifteen children become kings. The love of Havelok and Goldborough is remarkable:

Havelok bilefte with joye and gamen	(*remained*)
In Engelond and was therinne	
Sixty winter king with winne,	(*delight*)
And Goldeboru queen, that I wene	
So mikel love was hem bitwene	
That all the werd spak of hem two;	
He lovede hir and she him so	
That neither other mighte be	
Fro other ne no joye see	
But-yif he were togidere bothe.	

The political implications of the poem are clear: in the time it was written, the question of royal power was particularly acute. The English kings of the later 13th century were in conflict with the great lords of the land, and there was always the danger of treason and anarchy. In *Havelok* the main concern is the difference between good and bad rulers, the good being respectful of every class of people and popular everywhere, while the bad are tyrants, imposing their own will by force, hated by all. It is significant that these stories are found in manuscripts that contain lives of saints; these romances are not recorded as mere entertaining tales, but as deep lessons about the morality of power.

Sir Orfeo

Some time before 1300, a poet wrote a *lai* on a story which ultimately derives from the Greek myth of Orpheus and Euridice as told by Ovid, and by Boethius in his *Consolation of Philosophy*. There may have been a French version but it does not exist now. This poem is admired as the finest early romance in English; it is one of the rare Breton lays not written by Marie de France.

Orfeo is an English king with his capital in Winchester, and at the same time the best harper the world has ever seen. He is married to Dame Herodis and at the start of the action Herodis falls asleep beneath a grafted tree in the springtime orchard. There she has a strange dream-visit which drives her almost mad. First two knights order her to come with them:

Tho com her King all so blive	(*quickly*)
With an hundred knightes and mo,	
And damisels an hundred also,	(*ladies*)
All on snowewhite stedes.	(*horses*)
As white as milke were her wedes.	(*clothes*)

I no seighe never yete bifore
So fair creatours y-core.   (*select*)
The King hadde a croun on hed,
It nas of silver no of gold red,
Ac it was of a precious ston   (*But*)
As bright as the sonne it shon.

This fairy-king orders her to meet him in that place the next day, when she will be taken to his land, like it or not. The next day Orfeo surrounds her with a thousand knights:

Ac yete amiddes hem full right
The Quen was oway y-twight,   (*snatched*)
With fairy forth y-nome.   (*magic; taken*)

Orfeo is heart-broken. He decides to entrust his kingdom to his high steward, and go into the wilderness. There he spends ten years alone in the wild, eating wild berries and roots; when he plays his harp the wild animals come to listen. Sometimes he sees bands of fairies riding or dancing; one day he sees sixty fairy-ladies hunting with hawks:

To a levedy he was y-come,
Biheld and hath wele undernome
And seth by all thing that it is
Hiw owhen queen, Dam Herodis.
Yern he biheld hir, and she him eke,
As noither to other a word no speke.

He follows them into a rock and after a three-mile journey emerges into the other-world where he sees a great castle all of gold and precious stones. He presents himself as a minstrel and is admitted; there he sees a strange collection of people brought there by force, like Herodis:

Sum stode withouten hade   (*head*)
And sum non armes nade   (*had not*)
And sum thurch the body hadde wounde,
And sum lay wode, y-bounde,   (*crazy*)
And sum armed on hors sete
And sum astrangled as they ete,
And sum were in water adreint   (*drowned*)
And sum with fire all forshreint   (*shriveled*)

And he sees Herodis there, lying as she was taken, asleep under a tree. Going into the hall, he plays for the King and Queen, who are very pleased; the king makes a rash promise:

Now aske of me what it be,
Largelich ichill thee pay.

He asks for the lady under the tree; the king tries to dissuade him, but he insists, takes Herodis by the hand, and leads her back to Winchester. The story of the tragic loss of Euridice when Orpheus looks back too soon has been removed. Instead we have a familiar romance episode; he has been away ten years, his beard is long and rough, nobody can

recognize him. He lodges with a beggar (cf. Ulysses), asks news of the place, hears his own story and learns that his steward is still in charge.

The next morning he dresses in the beggar's clothes, goes alone to the palace, and sings. The steward asks where he got the harp, which he recognizes, and he says he found it in the wilderness beside a dead body. The steward collapses in grief, so Orfeo knows his faithfulness. He reveals his identity, the steward is so happy he knocks over the table to get to him, and everyone rejoices. They shave him, dress him, then go in procession to fetch Herodis. They rule a long time and the steward becomes king after.

Harpours in Bretaine after than	
Herd hou this mervaile bigan	
And made herof a lay of gode likeing	
And nempned it after the King;	(*named*)
That lay 'Orfeo' is y-hote,	(*called*)
God is the lay, swete is the note.	(*good*)

Sir Orfeo is neatly organized, combines a human love story with the strangeness of fairy elements, has a happy ending, and is aware of being in a literary tradition. It deals with the conflict between love and social duty in a strikingly radical way, Orfeo is able to abandon his social responsibilities for all this time thanks to the utterly unselfish steward.

The work is only found in one big manuscript of 700 pages called the Auchinleck manuscript, produced in London around 1345, in which are contained many of the more famous romances. Most of them are not as well-written as *Sir Orfeo* and it seems likely that Chaucer knew that manuscript of one very like it, for he laughs at the kind of tail-rhyming romance found there.

Bevis of Hampton and *Guy of Warwick*

These two romances, both written in English around 1300 but based on older stories found in 12th century French works, tell fantastic stories of adventures on an international stage. Bevis is the heir to the earl of Southampton but, carried off by Saracen pirates, he is given to the king of Armenia as a slave. The king's daughter, Josian, falls in love with him and promises to become a Christian. They are separated, and she is forced to marry another man but by magic she remains a virgin for seven years.

Bevis then escapes, frees her, and begins a series of adventures in Europe (obtaining his inheritance in England, then killing the German emperor who killed his father) and the Orient (rescuing Josian). They have twin sons, one of which becomes king of Armenia, the other marries the princess heir to the English throne. This odd story was immensely popular from Ireland to Russia, and was adapted in various forms until the present century, ending up as a children's tale.

Guy of Warwick was even more popular, in French and in English. His father is the steward of the earl of Warwick and the goal of all his many adventures is to be able to marry the earl's daughter Fenice, who is socially his superior. In the Auchinleck manuscript version there is a first section in which Guy fights in many tournaments in various countries so gloriously that he is offered the hands of princesses. After seven years, he returns, and marries Fenice.

In the second part, fifty days after their marriage Guy leaves his bride pregnant and becomes a pilgrim in penitence for all the fighting he has done. Years later he returns, disguised as a pilgrim, saves England from the Danish invasion by killing the Danish giant

Colbrand, as well as the terrible Dun Cow of Dunsmore. He then becomes a holy hermit, who is fed by the unknowing Fenice. He only shows her who he is by sending her a ring when he is dying,

The third part tells stories of their son, Reinbrun, who is stolen by pirates as a child, grows up in Africa, is rescued and returns to England to bring freedom to his father's imprisoned friend.

Such tales show that romance in England was often closer to saints' legends and folk-tale than to what is often termed literature (a word only invented in the later 19th century). Yet there are many themes which are not unrelated to the modern novel. Most of these stories, like the tales of Perceval in Chrétien de Troyes, are forerunners of the *Bildungsroman*. The hero is obliged to stand on his own from an early age. He finds himself in an unprivileged position in a cruel society, potentially the victim of poverty and injustice. Because of some latent power within himself he is not overcome, but in the course of wide-ranging travels and adventures learns his own identity. At the same time he is prepared for an unexpected destiny finally revealed to him. Society and love are both served selflessly, and in the end love and the public interest both gain immensely.

Fabliau and beast-fable

These well-known genres of narrative are scarcely represented in English before Chaucer. The *fabliau* was popular in 13th century France; it is a narrative poem or a prose narrative, usually describing some kind of disgraceful adventure involving sex or excrement. The central character in many fabliaux is a church sacristan or a clerk, someone associated with the Church but not in holy orders. The social level of the characters is usually low. For a time critics considered that these stories were the literature of the classes portrayed in them, but they are now thought more likely to have been a form of clerical humour, for an audience no different from that of the other literary genres. The only existing English fabliau is the poem *Dame Sirith*, a tale about a seduction.

Aesop's Fables were widely known, the beast-fable, in which animals are given human qualities, has a very long history. So it is strange that almost no works of this kind are found in English. An exception is one of the very first Middle English poems, *The Owl and the Nightingale* of about 1200, which is not so much a fable as a very lively debate between the two birds about which of them is more useful to mankind. Each produces arguments from old authorities and proverbs, as well as from experience, they are very learned birds and their debate touches on such varied topics as foreknowledge, music, and confession of sins. While the owl is solemn the nightingale is merry. Their debate ends without any decision. They agree to ask Nicholas of Guildford to be the judge between them. Perhaps that is the name of the author.

The original story Chaucer adapted as the *Nun's Priest's Tale* was part of the Latin beast-fable tradition that was very popular in the period. Out of this arose in the late 12th century the great French *Roman de Renart*, which uses the animals for ecclesiastical and social satire.

Lyric poetry in France

The love poetry of the troubadours was imitated at once by the courtly *trouvères* (minstrels) of northern France in the 12th and 13th century, both in form and in contents,

although the extreme moral freedom of the south never found favour in the north. For a long time lyric poems were composed to be sung, although the music has generally not survived, and there was a rule that such songs should all be different in form. Many lyric poems are anonymous, transmitted in anthologies. Among the most famous poets whose names are known are Conon de Béthune, Thibaud the king of Navarre, Gace Brulé, clearly lyric poets were often men of high social rank. Their poems are often grouped into genres: the ordinary songs are called *chansons à danser* because it is intended they should be sung while people danced.

The most popular form of dance at the time was called the *carole* in which a group of people danced in a round, holding hands. One would sing the verses, all joining in a refrain repeated at the end of each stanza. The most general form of lyric poems were called *chansons*, with 5, 6 or 7 stanzas united in groups by repeated rhymes. Another popular form was the *chanson à personnages*, where the poem represents a dialogue between two people, either a husband and wife quarrelling, or lovers lamenting the coming of dawn when they must part (*aubade*), or a knight seducing a shepherdess (*pastourelle*).

At the same time there are numerous anonymous poems found, often of less sophisticated form and matter; these may have been popular, or bourgeois in origin and offer love songs, hymns, celebrations of spring, of drinking, and also forms of social criticism and satire, as well as more personal complaints about how hard life is. The most remarkable is perhaps Rutebeuf of Paris, who seems to have lived in utter poverty amidst gamblers and other dregs of society. He is directly involved in social issues, and writes poems critical of the king, the pope, officials, nobles, merchants. He is one of the first to write about current social issues, such as the quarrels between the University of Paris and the religious orders.

Lyric poetry in England

There is nothing to equal the sophistication of French lyric verse in England; individual lyric poets do not emerge during the Middle Ages at all. There are manuscripts including lyric poems but the works are anonymous. The technique of most poems is of the simplest kind and they are lacking in individuality. There is no poem in England with contents corresponding to the troubadour traditions at all. There is one early collection of poems that is worth study. It is contained in a manuscript called the Harley Manuscript, now in the British Library in London. This manuscript contains many religious and some secular poems in English, French, and Latin; it may have been copied by Franciscans around 1320, and the poems seem to have been written in the late 13th century.

One of the most famous poems, and the shortest, is a kind of riddle:

Earthe took of earthe earthe with woe
Earthe other earthe to the earthe drow   (*drew*)
Earthe laide earthe in earthene throh   (*grave*)
Tho hevede earthe of earthe earthe enow   (*had, enough*)

The poem is describing people burying a dead body. The most popular love song in the collection begins:

Betweene Mersh ant Averil
       when spray beginnith to springe
the little fowl hath hire wil   (*bird*)
       on hire lud to singe.   (*language*)

Ich libbe in love-longinge   (*live*)
for semlokest of alle thinge;   (*fairest*)
she may me blisse bringe
        ich am in hire baundoun.   (*power*)

        An hendy hap ichabbe yhent   (*good luck*)
        ichot from hevene it is me sent;   (*I know*)
        from all wymmen mi love is lent   (*taken*)
                ant lyht on Alysoun   (*alighted*)

These and the other 30 English poems in the Harley lyrics are marked by a high level of technique that is not paralleled later. In some poems there is use made of alliteration, as well as verse and rhythm. This serves to show that the poets in western England had not lost the old art of alliterative verse, although few manuscripts survive containing it.

The most charming of the Harley lyrics are probably the religious ones. Later too, English medieval religious lyric poetry has a special lightness. Others, though, are more serious:

Winter wakeneth all my care,
now these leaves waxeth bare;
oft I sike ant mourne sare   (*sigh, bitterly*)
when it cometh in my thought
of this worldes joye how it goth to nought.

Now it is and now it nis,   (*isn't*)
also hit ner nere ywis.   (*as if it never had been indeed*)
That mony mon sayth soth hit is: (*what many say is true*)
all goth bute Godes wille,
all we shule deye thah us like ille.   (*though we dislike it*)

All that grein me graveth grene,   (*grain, bury, green*)
now it faleweth all bydene;   (*withers, quickly*)
Jesu, help that it be seene,
and shield us from helle
for I not whider I shal ne how long her dwelle.
                (*I don't know where I'll go, or how long
                I'll be here before I go*)

Le Roman de la Rose

This French poem was one of the most influential works of the Middle Ages, and must be mentioned here. It falls into two parts. The first 4000 lines were written by **Guillaume de Lorris** in about 1230, in the form of a complex allegory of love. The knightly narrator tells of a dream-vision in which personified Idleness brings him into the Garden of Love. There he sees Pleasure, Delight, and the god of Love himself. Suddenly he sees reflected in a fountain a rose-bud which he longs to pick. This is an allegorical symbol for his first glimpse of his Lady, and the rest of the events reported represent the difficulties and sufferings a lover must undergo. For it is clear that love is essentially a matter of pain, rather

than of pleasure. The Lady of his desires is inaccessible, and social pressures only increase the distance between them as the story advances. At a given moment Pity and Venus intervene, one kiss is permitted. Then the problems become even greater, and the poem breaks off, incomplete.

In 1275-80 another writer, **Jean de Meung**, set out to complete the poem, adding 18,000 lines in a very different style. It is true that the allegorical story is brought to a conclusion, the rose is finally plucked, although it seems unlikely that Guillaume de Lorris would have wanted this image of adultery triumphant. Most of what Jean de Meung writes is encyclopedic digression in which he expresses a large range of opinions and shows vast learning of a rather pedantic kind.

One of the main objects of his satire (he has a very sharp tongue) is Woman, he being quite out of sympathy with the troubadours and the ethos of *fine amor*. He also attacks the corruptions of society, seen in magistrates, noblemen, and friars. he discusses the nature of royal power, the origins of poverty, the nature of morality. His most positive vision comes when Nature reveals herself as the proper standard by which to judge true nobility, true wealth, and true love. His standpoint is that of a citizen, not an aristocrat, and he echoes popular resentments in much of his satire. Chaucer was deeply influenced by the contents and style of the Romance of the Rose, although he had no interest at all in allegory.

The entire work was read everywhere in Europe well into the Renaissance; the Renaissance Humanists admired the moral vision of the continuation, despite its fierce anti-feminism. In England Chaucer and others translated at least portions of both parts of the poem in the 14th century.

Dante Alighieri

Born in Florence (Italy) in 1265, **Dante** died in exile in Ravenna in 1321. The *Divina Commedia* is generally considered to be the most important work written in any vernacular language in medieval Europe and one of the greatest literary monuments of humanity. It may be said that Dante chose the opposite method to the *Romance of the Rose*. Where Guillaume de Lorris took the love stories found in older narratives and allegorized them into a universal pattern, Dante took his age's interest in Love (usually personified by him too), experienced it personally, then wrote. He chose to write in the Florentine dialect, so creating a standard literary Italian language for the first time.

At nine o'clock on a morning in May 1283 Dante was walking down a street in Florence when he met a seventeen-year-old girl named Beatrice, whom he had first seen when he was nine. She was wearing a white dress and was accompanied by two rather older friends. As they passed she looked at him and said, "Salute", which was a normal greeting but also means Salvation. It was the first time she spoke to him. Telling the story of his experience of Love in the book of love poems and explanations called *Vita nuova* (1290-4), he analyses his feelings at that moment:

> The spirit of life trembled and said, 'Behold a god stronger than I who is come to rule over me'. The animal spirit of the brain was amazed and said, 'Now your Beatitude has appeared'. The natural spirit in the guts said, 'O miserable wretch! How often now I shall be disturbed.'

By this time he was engaged and perhaps already married to another woman. For him there was no question of an affair but of a silent adoration. To preserve the secret of his feelings, he pretended to be interested in other women, and because of this, another time

Beatrice passed by without any sign. Dante went home and cried like a beaten child! On the evening of June 8, 1290, Dante had just written the first stanza of a song in praise of Beatrice's humility when news came that she had died. Dante was *abbandonata dalla sua salute.*

In 1302, after almost ten years of political and military activity in the civil wars, Dante found himself on the losing side and was condemned to death in his absence. He never returned to Florence. He turned for consolation to Philosophy as Boethius had done, reading the *Consolation of Philosophy*, where Philosophy appears personified as a woman. Out of this he began to write, again in Italian, the *Convivio*, a book about Aristotelian philosophy for the simpler people, with songs interspersed as in Boethius. He never finished it. He also began a work in Latin in which he discusses the possible use of Italian in epic poetry.

It is not sure when the *Divina Commedia* was begun, it is the result of the maturation of his understanding of life through the double experience of Love and Loss. He had loved and lost Beatrice; he had loved and lost Florence; he also had a certain vision of the Christian Church, which the move of the Pope from Rome to Avignon in 1309 seemed to deny. Using the Aristotelian categories of Scholasticism, the Divine Comedy offers a poetic synthesis corresponding to Dante's world-view.

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
     mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
     che la diritta via era smarrita.

(In the middle of the journey of our life
I came to myself within a dark wood
where the straight way was lost)

The journey of Dante begins in anguish; in this desert place he encounters the shade of Virgil who then becomes his guide on a journey, first down through the winding gyres of *Inferno*. There he encounters many terrible examples, ancient and contemporary, of lack of love, failures of truth, denials of vision. Sin is for Dante as much social as individual. At last they emerge from under the ground and see the stars shining.

They begin to climb a great hill, the hill of *Purgatorio*, where souls wait to be purified before entering heaven. Here too they meet and talk with individuals about many topics including the right way of social and political involvement for the individual and for the Church.

At the top of Mount Purgatory is the Earthly Paradise, beyond this point Virgil cannot go and Dante's guide for the final light and joys of *Paradiso* is Beatrice. Finally she too is taken from him to join the saints in light, and the final moment of Dante's vision of God in whom all things in heaven and earth are joined in harmony is the result of St Bernard's prayer to the Virgin Mary. The last line speaks of the Love that moves the sun and other stars.

The first Englishman to read Dante that we know of was Chaucer; it is not sure how much he understood or admired. At least he quoted a few lines at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, but the talkative eagle that carries him aloft in the *House of Fame* is also from Dante and shows little of the greatness we might expect. The author of *Pearl* also may very well have been inspired by the *Divine Comedy*; there are signs that other English readers admired it too but Dante only really found an English audience in the 19th century, thanks to the admiration of Byron and Shelley, and Ruskin. In the 20th century T. S. Eliot made many younger readers aware of him. Several new translations into English have been made in recent years.

Further Reading

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