

## The Fourteenth Century

Almost all the famous works of medieval English literature, except for the dramas, and the works of Lydgate and Malory, were written in the second half of the 14th century (1351-1400): *Piers Plowman*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl*, and the other works of the so-called Alliterative Revival, many lyrics, the works of Chaucer and Gower, as well as the spiritual writings of people such as Julian of Norwich. Yet in the first half of the century there is almost no record of new works being written.

### Social and political history

In all the 14th century, England had only five kings: Edward I, II, III, Richard II, Henry IV. After the death of Edward I in 1307, **Edward II** became king. He was deposed and murdered in 1327 in circumstances of social conflict and personal corruption that Christopher Marlowe dramatized in his play *Edward II*. **Edward III**, who then became king at only fifteen, initiated the Hundred Years' War in an attempt to regain control over the lands in Normandy and Anjou lost to France in 1204. His invasion of France in 1337 began a series of campaigns, often interrupted for lack of money, which only ended with the defeat of the English in 1453. His rule was a time of intense conflict within the country, of power struggles and an endless royal pursuit of money, while the English invasions brought France to its knees, destroying its agriculture and ruining its economy. The great military hero of the later years of Edward's reign was his eldest son Edward, the Black Prince, as he was later called, who died just before his father, in 1376. A younger son, John of Gaunt, was the patron of Chaucer and the nation's leading power-broker.

Edward III died in 1377, when his grandson, the Black Prince's son, became king **Richard II** when he was only ten. For the next twelve years England was ruled by his mother and a council of twelve lords. From the time when Richard became active king in 1389, he was in constant conflict about power and money with the powerful barons, until he was deposed in 1399 and John of Gaunt's son Henry Bolingbroke, his cousin, became king Henry IV. Richard died mysteriously in prison soon after.

During this century England became fully integrated in a complex network of international trade and was deeply affected by the rise of a dynamic and ambitious merchant class of free citizens in London and the other main cities. Chaucer belonged to this class. England had a **population** of under five million in the first half of the century, of whom perhaps 40,000 lived in London. No other town had 10,000 citizens. It is striking that Edward III and Richard II ruled in a very luxurious style, inspired by the codes of chivalry found in the romances. The royal court was the centre of a refined culture that cost a lot of money, while many peasants in the countryside could scarcely live.

### The Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt

The most terrible event of the century was the **Black Death**, the plague pandemic that spread across the world from the Far East (China, probably) in the fleas on the rats that lived in the cities and on the merchant ships. When it reached Western Europe in 1348, there was scarcely a village that was spared. In some places everybody died, usually on the third day of sickness, in other places the plague was more selective. Altogether in 1348-9, between one

third and one half of the population of Western Europe died. There was no protection, the rich died like the poor, it is astonishing that the structures of society did not collapse.

The Jews had been expelled from England by Henry II in the 12th century; in parts of Germany and elsewhere in Europe the Jewish communities were accused of poisoning wells to cause the plague and there were *pogroms* (massacres) in several cities. After this first outbreak, the plague returned to ravage individual cities at regular intervals of about 10 years. The last Great Plague in London occurred in 1665. The relationship between the plague and fleas was only discovered in the late 19th century.

One major result of so many deaths was a sudden rise in the demand for farm laborers, whose wages were kept low by law. In 1381 there was the **Peasants' Revolt** in Kent and elsewhere, led by Wat Tyler, John Ball, Jack Strawe. Thousands of them marched on London, killing the Archbishop of Canterbury and many noblemen before being overcome during a dramatic encounter with the young Richard II. There was a strong anti-clerical side to their protest, since the Church was identified with power; it owned vast areas of land, and high churchmen were great lords. The peasants also singled out for murder the Flemish weavers who had settled in England to benefit from the famous English wool, producing expensive cloth. Xenophobia fired by jealousy is a familiar pattern in many societies.

### Wyclif and the Lollards

The Black Death brought a new urgency to people's search to be assured of Christ's salvation, since the plague might strike at any moment and seemed to take the young and strong first. A new movement of popular Christianity began to challenge the structures of feudalism, and especially of feudal Christianity, under the leadership of an Oxford teacher, **John Wyclif** (1330-84). He became the intellectual leader of people, soon called Lollards, who wished to return to a more intensely personal form of Christianity. He realized the need to have the Bible in English and with others began the work of translation. This was the first such work since King Alfred's time and became a symbol of democratic rights; all people should be able to read the Bible in their own language. He was a popular preacher and his anti-clericalism made him popular with great lords like Richard II's uncle John of Gaunt.

Wyclif's philosophical training convinced him that each person should be free to seek for the truth, by free enquiry, rather than be obliged to believe what the Church taught. In particular he came to query the Church's teaching about the transubstantiation of the bread and wine in the Mass into the substance of Christ's Body and Blood; this was a formulation based on Aristotelian categories that are not found in the Bible. He was found guilty of heresy (wrong teaching) and retired to the countryside. In his teaching about social justice, he may be seen as one of the first modern Christian Socialists, rejecting the feudal structures of land ownership and serfdom.

The Wycliffites of England seem to have inspired **John Huss** and the Hussites of Bohemia, who arose only a few years later with similar ideas, and some of Luther's teaching echoes their ideas. The Protestants of the 16th century Reformation recognized Wyclif as a prophet of Reform. In 1401 the law in England was changed to allow the burning of heretics, a continental custom, and many Lollards suffered this terrible and inhuman fate during the 15th century. The religious and ideological terror that helped sustain the reigns of Henry VIII and his daughters began at this point.

### The Hundred Years' War

The first years of the **Hundred Years' War** are known in detail thanks to the French chronicler **Jean Froissart** (1337-1410). He visited the English court several times, he admired its elegant chivalric games immensely. He tells the romantic story of the surrender of Calais to Edward III, when seven of the Burghers (chief citizens) came out with ropes around their necks, offering to be hanged in place of the whole population. The English Queen Philippa, who was from France, knelt down and begged him to spare their lives, which he finally did. Froissart records the English victory over the French at Crecy (1346) with disapproval, because French noblemen were killed by English commoners shooting arrows, instead of in formal combats with knights as in the romances.

The population of France was over twelve million at the beginning of the wars, but a third died during the Black Death, as well as all those killed during the fighting, and in subsequent famines, parts of France were never able to recover. In 1356 the Black Prince captured the French king in Poitiers. He killed thousands of citizens and sent the king to England, his ransom was fixed at three million gold coins. In return, England gave up its claim to the French throne. In 1358 there was an uprising of the French peasants (*Jacquerie*) on account of their intolerable sufferings.

### Alliterative poetry

Very few new works of literature survive from the period 1300 - 1350, but in the second half of the century we suddenly find a considerable number of long narrative poems written in forms of alliterative metre very similar to that used in Old English poems like *Beowulf*. Some of these poems are among the most famous works of the Middle Ages: *Pearl*, *Piers Plowman*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

As seen in the last chapter, the **Harley lyrics** (before 1325) contain poems which use alliteration, but in a more decorative, less structural way than in Old English poems; this can be seen in the opening stanzas of this poem about women's worthiness:

Weeping haveth myn wonges wet	(my cheeks)
For wicked work and want of wit.	
Unblithe I be till I have bet	(unhappy; made better)
Bruches broken, as book bit,	(sins; commands)
Of ladies' love that I have let	(lost)
That gleameth all with lovely light.	
Oft in song I have them set,	
That is unseemly there it sit.	
It sits and seemeth nought	
There it is said in song;	
That I have of them wrought	
Ywis it is all wrong.	

All wrong I wroughte for a wife	(woman)
That made us woe in world full wide,	
She rafte us alle richesse rife	(robbed; plentiful)
That durthe us not in reines ride.	(should; reins)
A stythe stunte her stern strife	(fine lady; stopped)
That is in heaven's heart in-hide.	(hidden)
In hire light one leadeth life	(her; alighted)
And shone through her seemly side.	

Through her side he shone  
 As sun doth through the glass;  
 Women nes wicked none  
 Since he y-bore was. . .

Like the Harley lyrics, almost all the poems written in alliterative verse in the 14th and 15th centuries are associated with the West and North-west of England, often with Cheshire. It is not possible to explain the historical development of this poetic form, since too many works are not recorded in surviving manuscripts. The expression “**Alliterative Revival**” is popular, but nobody knows if there was really a revival of alliteration, or only a time when people began to write poems in alliterative metre in manuscripts big enough and strong enough to survive.

One striking point about these alliterative poems is their vocabulary. Descriptions of armour and buildings, of hunting and battle all demand the use of technical terms, and these poems are full of new words borrowed from French. Besides, one characteristic of many ‘alliterative poems’ is the large number of synonyms they use for man: *burne, freke, gome, hathel, lede, renk, schalk, segge, wyghe* are all found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In *Piers Plowman* all these words except *hathel* and *schalk* are found, despite the quite different subject matter and descriptive techniques. Strange to say, if we go back to *Beowulf*, written six hundred years earlier and unknown to the 14th century writers, we find exactly the same words: *beorn, freca, guma, haeled, leod, rinc, scealc, secg, wiga*. Some of these words are not recorded in the earlier High Middle Ages at all, others are found in Layamon’s *Brut*, for example, associated with the same regions.

These alliterative poems show a new confidence in the strength of English as a literary language, and may be the result of a spreading literacy (ability to read) among the gentry living on estates in the country areas. There is almost no sign that people in London were familiar with these poems until some time after they were written, if ever. The only alliterative poem that was certainly read nation-wide, even in London, is *Piers Plowman*, still existing in over fifty manuscripts.

### *Wynnere and Wastoure*

The first in date of the group of surviving alliterative poems seems to be the dream-vision debate *Wynnere and Wastoure* in which a traditional social conflict is dramatized in vivid terms. The theme is the opposition between winners -- those who work hard and earn (win) money that they then save -- and wasters -- those who are always busy spending (wasting) money that they have not done anything to earn. There is here a question of fundamental economic theory, expressed in an age that had no abstract understanding of money-economies. The poem begins in the form of an allegorical battle about to begin between two armies, which the narrator sees in a dream. The passage in which he describes how he fell asleep is typical of many dream visions (*spelling somewhat modernized*):

As I went in the west wandering mine own	
By a bank of a bourne, bright was the sun,	(stream)
Under a worthiliche wood by a wale meadow	(fine; rich)
Fele flowers gan fold there my foot stepped	(many; bend)
I laid mine head on an hill an hawthorn beside	
The throstles full throwly they threpen together	(fight)
And I was swythe in a sweven swept belyve	(soon; dream;

quickly)

There follows a long description of the armies, their banners and equipment, before the two enemies start to present their case before king Edward III who has to decide between them. The king finally gives a judgement in favour of both, since in fact all spending by one side is earning by another and from a simple viewpoint business only flourishes if there are customers. The last part of his judgement is a very lively picture of the tavern-keepers in London streets, all alert to rob their customers of their last penny, while the king promises to go and capture more wealth in France soon.

This kind of poem, in which a debate is the central feature of a dream-vision, seems to have been popular. A similar poem is that called *The Parlement of the Three Ages*, the word *parlement* being French for a debate. Here the fact of human transience is dealt with, in an encounter between Youth, Middle-elde (age), and Elde.

The **dream-vision** itself was a traditional literary form, the main classical model for which was Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, in which a younger Scipio dreams of a conversation with an earlier very famous Scipio, who returns from the dead, reveals to him his future, and instructs him in virtue; this story formed part of a long-lost part of Cicero's *De Republica*, it survived in a commentary by Macrobius where it becomes a proof of the immortality of the soul. Boethius used a similar technique in his *Consolatio Philosophiae*, where the dreaming prisoner encounters the personification of Philosophy. In both cases it is clear that the vision within a dream gives added solemnity and weight to the wisdom that the author wishes to express. In the Middle Ages, the great model was the *Romance of the Rose*, where the author(s) take advantage of the conventions found in Boethius to introduce encounters and debates between the dreamer and allegorical personifications.

### *Pearl*

In the manuscript containing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* we find three religious poems, perhaps by the same unknown author, *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*. *Cleanness* tells stories from the Old Testament that are concerned with punishments for impurity, such as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. *Patience* tells in a lively way the story of the prophet Jonah. Like *Wynnerre and Wastoure*, *Pearl* is a dream vision, of particular interest because of its very sophisticated techniques of narration and versification. It begins:

Perle pleasaunte to princes paye	(delight)
To clanly clos in golde so clere	(enclose)
Out of oryent I hardyly saye	(boldly)
Ne proved I never her precios pere.	(equal)
So rounde so reken in uche araye	(lovely; each setting)
So smal so smothe her sydez were;	
queresoever I jugged gemmez gaye	(wherever; judged)
I sette hyr sengeley in synglure.	(singly; unique)
Allas! I leste hyr in on erbere	(a garden)
Thurg gresse to grounde hit fro me yot.	(Through; fell)
I dewyne, fordolked of luf-daungere	(languish; wounded)
Of that pryvy perle withouten spot.	(special)

Sythen in that spote hit fro me sprange  
Ofte haf I wayted, wyschande that wele

That wont watz whyle devoyde my wrange  
 And heven my happe and al my hele,  
 That dotz bot thrych my hert thrange,  
 My breste in bale bot bolne and bele.  
 Yet thogt me never so swete a sange  
 As stylle stounde let to me stele.  
 Forsothe ther fleten to me fele.  
 To thenke hir color so clad in clot!  
 O moult, thou marrez a myry juele,  
 My privy perle withouten spotte.

(since it leapt from me in that place I have often waited, longing for that good that before was accustomed to banish my woes and increase my joy and all my well-being, that now oppresses my heart sorely so that my breast swells and burns in anguish. Never yet did a song seem to me to have such sweetness as a moment of peace let steal over me. In truth there used to come fleetingly to me many (such moments). To think of her colour clad, as now, in mud! Oh earth! you are marring a lovely gem, my special pearl without a stain.)

*Pearl* is a first-person narrative. The dreamer encounters a girl whom he realizes is his dead daughter. They have a long discussion about her present status in Heaven, where she says she is a queen. The dreamer is given a vision of the heavenly Jerusalem before he wakes, finally consoled for the loss of his child.

The poem is written in heavily alliterated lines organized in 12-line stanzas, with only three rhymes in each stanza; the stanzas are grouped in twenty groups of five, (but section XV has six) the stanzas of each group being linked by having a similar (though not identical) last line, while the first line of each stanza (except the first in each group) contains one or two words from that same last line. The first line of the first stanza in each section is linked to the refrain of the preceding group, and the first line of the poem echoes the “Pryncez paye” refrain of the last section of the poem so that the whole poem is like a pearl in its circularity. In addition, in the first section the word spot which occurs in each first line in the sense of place is used in the final refrain line in the sense of stain.

This very formal pattern of **concatenation** (linkage) is accompanied by other formal features, such as the fact that the total number of stanzas is 101, and of lines 1212. The narrative structure, too, is highly structured. There is a strong symmetry in this poem, the garden being the beginning (I) and the end (XX); at the centre lie sections IX and X (the Parable of the Vineyard) XI and XII (the explanation of it, God’s generosity) while sections V-VIII and XIII-XVI are debate, II-IV describe the Paradise where they first meet, XVII-XIX describe the heavenly Jerusalem which is the climax of the poem. The formal aspects of this poem, its technical virtuosity, the interplay between form and theme, are unique in the English poems of its time; we must look to Spenser’s *Epithalamion* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* for similar qualities.

Critics have much discussed the sense of the poem. On a surface reading, it seems that the poet has deliberately reversed the conventions of dream-vision, using allegory in the initial waking narrative and becoming concrete in the vision. By this reading, the poem is about a man (the narratorial persona) whose daughter died when still a baby; the child’s name may have been Margery, an old word for pearl. The learning process that the poem records in its debates is a passing from over-human grief to true Christian hope, by means of what the Gospels say about eternal life.

On the other hand, since all the vision-material is derived from the Bible, the poem is not the record of some special private mystical experience, and some critics have looked for

other, more symbolic interpretations. There is also a question as to whether the poet may have known Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Like all the poems in this manuscript (listed as Cotton Nero A.x. in the British Library, London) *Pearl* is unique, there is no other copy, and there is no sign it was ever widely read.

### *Piers Plowman*

There is nothing else at all similar to *Piers Plowman* in the whole of English literature; it is very long and offers great difficulties, but it is often seen as one of the most interesting ('greatest'), as well as the most intensely personal poems of the Middle Ages. In form it is the story of one man's life's quest expressed as a dream-vision, only there are numerous dreams, sometimes even dreams-within-dreams, and the narrator also reports encounters with allegorical personifications during his waking moments! Although traditionally the author is named as **William Langland**, because of some jokes he makes about the words of his name, nothing is known about him except what the poem suggests. He seems to be from north-west England (Malvern?) but obviously knows London well, and has a remarkably sharp eye for the suffering of the poor and the selfishness of the rich, as well as the corruptions of the Church. It seems that he knew personally what it is to be in great poverty, he views society from that standpoint, like Rutebeuf and Villon in French, but with an intense Christian vision leading him to challenge all that he sees, in the hope of reforming it.

*Piers Plowman* exists in three very different versions, called today A, B, and C. It looks as if the writer began his poem in the 1360s, wrote the 2500 lines found in the A-version, then stopped for a time and various people copied this fragment. Then in about 1377-9 he revised this first version and completed it with 4000 more lines, divided into a Prologue and twenty sections or Passus (steps). This was much copied. A few years later, around 1385, he revised most of that B-version, producing a slightly longer C version with a Prologue and twenty-two Passus. Some argue, though, that the A version is an abbreviation made after the B version was complete.

Langland is interested in challenging the way that people live in society, and stresses the tension between the Gospel and fallen human nature. His work was much read by churchmen and ordinary people who, like the Lollards, wanted to live better Christian lives in a rotten world. When the Reformation came in the 16th century, the B-version of *Piers Plowman* was printed several times (1550-1561) because it expresses so dynamically many of the reformers' main themes, and so was known to the age of Spenser and Shakespeare. More than 50 manuscripts of the various versions exist, showing how popular it was. The other alliterating poems often only survive in one or two manuscripts, while 80 manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* have survived. Because it is at times more suggestive, many critics until today have preferred B to C, but it seems obvious that the C version represents the writer's final intention and today student editions of both versions are available. Some critics have tried to show that A, B, and C are the work of different writers or redactors but that is not today admitted.

The whole poem is the record of a man's quest for the meaning of life or of Truth (as he calls it), and the figure of Piers (Peter) the Plowman only appears a few times, at vital moments in the quest; he is *not* the Dreamer-narrator, who is called Will (William) and indeed he is as difficult to pin down as the poem itself, being at the same time a representative figure of the honest, simple, country folk of England, the Apostle Peter, and Christ himself.

There are long passages in the poem that not even specialists can enjoy; what have most appealed to readers are the vivid evocations of daily life and attitudes, and some of the descriptions of Christ's suffering which are astonishingly complex in their poetry of association. The poet is clearly trying to communicate with his readers, the words used are mostly very simple, and the flow of the verse is much closer to ordinary speech than that found in ordinary alliterative poems.

The poem begins like other dream-visions (*quotations from the C-version in slightly modernized spelling*):

In a summer season when soft was the sun  
 I shop me into shrouds as I a sheep were,  
 In habit as an hermit, unholy of works,  
 Went forth in the world, wonders to hear,  
 And saw many sellies and selcouthe things. (*marvels; strange*)  
 Ac on a May morning on Malvern hills  
 Me befell for to sleep, for weariness off-walked  
 And in a land as I lay leaned and slept  
 And marvellously me met, as I may tell.  
 All the wealth of the world and the wo both  
 Winking as it were witterliche I saw it; (*for sure*)  
 Of truth and trickery, treason and guile,  
 All I saw sleeping, as I shall tell.

Eastward I beheld after the sun  
 And saw a tower, as I trowed Truth was therein;  
 Westward I waited in a while after (*looked*)  
 And saw a deep dale: Death, as I live,  
 Woned in that wones, and wicked spirits. (*lived; dwelling*)  
 A fair field of folk found I there between  
 Of all manner of men, the mean and the poor,  
 Working and wandering as this world asketh.

The Prologue offers many glimpses of working life and of widespread corruption in the Church, and in the king's court, where there is little hope of getting justice. The whole section is full of immense business, with people serving their own interests in all directions.

In Passus I, the Dreamer is confronted with a lady from the tower who challenges him, "Will, sleepest thou?" and he asks, "What may this be to mean?" She explains first that Truth, the father of faith, lives in the tower, and Wrong, the father of falsehood in the deep dale. Will asks who she is, and she identifies herself as Holy Church who teaches the way of salvation; this is an echo of Lady Philosophy in Boethius, perhaps. She advises him that Truth (God) is the best of all treasures, and he continues to ask how to live truthfully until she explains:

For Truth telleth that love is triacle to abate sin (*medecine*)  
 And most sovereign salve for soul and for body.  
 Love is plant of peace, most precious of virtues,  
 For heaven hold it ne might, so heavy it first seemed,  
 Til it had of earth begotten itself.  
 Was never leaf upon linden lighter thereafter, (*limetree*)  
 As when it had of the folde flesh and blood taken. (*earth*)  
 Then was it portatif and persaunt as is the point of a needle,



May no armour it let ne none heavy walls. (keep out)

In this Passus all the main themes of the whole poem are introduced, including the great moral confrontation in human history between Truth and False, the primacy of Charity (love) which is expressed in the love of Christ on the cross, and the fact that most people look for their heaven in this world. From this moment, Will is in quest of ever-deeper understanding of this teaching.

In Passus II, the allegory turns to corruption in society, in particular corruption through the economic realities of profits and rewards, which the development of a money economy was making more urgent to confront. Lady Meed (reward), is to be married to False Faithless, an expression of all the deceit practised in pursuit of money. But Theology objects that only Truth should be Meed's husband, and again there is dispute, involving also the corruptions of the Friars in the Church.

Passus III takes the dispute to a more general and complex level in the king's court, where Conscience also intervenes. The case becomes more complicated still in Passus IV, where finally it becomes clear that Conscience and Reason must be the king's main guides to what is right; Meed is ejected and laughed at.

At the start of Passus V the Dreamer awakes and applies the lessons learned in the dream to himself, confessing his own sin, before falling asleep again, when Reason appears to preach to all society:

He bade wasters to work and win their sustenance  
Through some true travail and no time spille. (waste)  
He prayed Purnele her porfiel to leave (fur coat)  
And keep it in her coffer for catel at her need (reserves)  
Tom Stove he taught to take two staves  
And fetch Felicity home from wifely pain.  
He warned Watt his wife was to blame  
For her hood was worth half a marc and his hood not a goat.  
He bade Butte to cut a bough or two  
And beat Betene therewith butif she would work. (unless)

No section of society is spared and in Passus VI we come to one of the great moments in *Piers Plowman* as individual characters make confession of their characteristic (seven) deadly sins in such a way as to show how people's lives are poisoned by the attitudes they represent -- Pride as self-sufficient arrogance, Envy full of back-biting, Wrath who is a vicious and bitter spreader of false rumours, Lechery who is always thinking about sex, and Avarice who cheats in business, steals, and thinks only of profit. The confession of Gluttony is famous for its vivid portrayal of excessive drinking.

The series of confessions continues into Passus VII, with Sloth who is only interested in stories about Robin Hood. All together repent and are absolved, which introduces a new stage in the quest, no longer personal to the Dreamer, but common to all. A thousand people want to go to Truth, but nobody knows the way. There comes a pilgrim who has visited many foreign shrines of saints, but says he has never heard of people in quest of Truth.

'Peter!' quod a ploughman, and put forth his head,  
'I know him as kindly as a clerk doth his books. (naturally)  
Conscience and kind Wit kened me to his place  
And made me sykeren sethen to serve him for ever.

The introduction of Piers at this point, as guide to Truth, may astonish; especially because he gives many complicated allegorical directions which in fact mean that everyone should keep the commandments and concludes:

And if Grace grant thee to go in this wise,  
Thou shalt see Truth sitting in thy self heart  
And solace thy soul and save thee from pain,  
And charge Charity a church to make  
In thine whole heart...

Many turn away, discouraged by the difficulties of moral living, but in any case, Piers does not go anywhere. Instead he asks them all to help plough his half-acre of land (Passus VIII) which brings back the theme of winners and wasters, and the need to work. There is a conflict between Piers and Waster, but Piers sends Hunger after Waster to teach him a lesson. This leads into a more general discussion of the problem of poverty, seen in England's many beggars and unemployed poor. This discussion is still not resolved today: in a free economy unemployment is inevitable, how then shall those unemployed people eat?

Passus IX continues to reflect on the moral plight of the idle poor, but at the same time Piers has received a pardon by which all are saved, without need of further pilgrimage. At last a priest reads Piers' pardon, which begins "Dowel and have wel and God shall have thy soul." Again the stress is on practical living, the need to do what is right and good, but a priest (organized religion) objects to this so noisily that Will wakes up again "meatless and moneyless on Malvern Hills".

Passus X begins a new stage, a quest for Dowel (do well) at the start of which Will sleeps again, and learns from Thought that in fact there are three: Dowel, Dobet (do better) and Dobest. The whole central part of the poem is more difficult to read, with abstract discussion on topics such as Learning and Salvation (Passus XI), Humility and Patient Poverty (XII), culminating in a vision of Nature (Mirror of Middle-earth) in Passus XIII. In Passus XIV a new figure appears, Imaginatif (Imagination as the power of intuitive understanding), but none of this helps advance in the quest and Will wakes (XV) to find himself getting old, still no closer to the truth. Again sleep comes, and he sees Piers as a beggar incarnating Patience; his message is "The patient conquer" then he vanishes again, to be replaced by Active Life who claims to be Piers' apprentice, but is very confused.

In Passus XVI suddenly the word Charity appears and gives a new dimension and a new impetus to the quest. In the course of Passus XVII, Charity is found to be the same as the Church and the Christian Gospel. Passus XVIII enters a new stage (Dobet) with the presentation of Charity in the image of a tree called "the image of God" rooted in the human heart and bearing fruits of holiness. The debates are now replaced by images of greater vigour. At the start of Passus XIX, Spes (hope) comes in search of Christ, carrying a letter that says "love God and thy neighbour" (the basic theme of the whole poem) leading into a picture of the Samaritan, who is also Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, helping the helpless man at the roadside, the truest image of active charity.

Passus XX is the climax of the poem, a re-statement of the Gospel stories of the loving death and resurrection of Christ in which all the main themes are given their full power by the author's poetic talent:

Wollewaerd and wet-shoed went I forth after  
As a reckless renk that recketh not of sorrow,  
And yede forth alike a lorel all my lifetime                    (*lazy lout*)

Till I waxed weary of the world and willed eefte to sleep  
And leaned me to Lenten and long time I slept.  
Of gurlles and of *gloria laus* greatly me dreamed  
And how Hosanna by organ welde folk song.  
One semblable to the Samaritan and somedeal to Piers the plowman  
Barefoot on a ass-back bootless came pricking  
Withouten spurs or spear, sprightly he looked,  
As is the kind of a knight that comes to be dubbed  
To get their gilt spurs and galoshes y-couped.

The combination in the Perceval-like figure coming to joust in Jerusalem of the Samaritan and Piers gives added dimensions to this whole Passus. The story of the Passion of Christ is summarized, culminating in:

‘*Consummatum est*’ quod Christ, and commenceth for to swoon.  
Piteously and pale, as prisoner that dieth,  
The Lord of life and of light then laid his eyes together.  
The day for dread thereof withdrew and dark became the sun;  
The wall of the temple to-cleft even all to pieces,  
The hard rock all to-rove, and right dark night it seemed.

There are quarrels between the four Daughters of God, Mercy and Truth, Peace and Justice, as to the effect of Jesus’ death, but they finally concur and this is followed by the breaking down of the gateways of death by the soul of Jesus, setting free the soul of Adam and all who died before.

Finally, the last two Passus XXI, XXII return to the theme of the Church, the promise it contains, and the enormous problem caused by the contemporary corruptions by which even the central Gospel of hope and love is compromised. In the last Passus the figure of Antichrist appears and the future looks very dark. There seems no hope left:

‘By Christ,’ quod Conscience then, ‘I will become a pilgrim  
And wenden as wide as the world reigneth  
To seek Piers the Plowman, that Pride might destroy  
And that friars had a finding, that for need flatter,  
And counterplead me, Conscience. Now Kind me avenge,  
And send me hap and heal till I have Piers the plowman.’  
And sethe he cried after Grace till I gan awake.

It is on this that the poem ends. There is a vast social dimension and a deep religious faith in *Piers Plowman*, that perhaps explain why it has always been read, but it is too long and obscure for easy pleasure. It is, though, the greatest product of the alliterative revival and the way it was revised shows a profoundly creative human mind never satisfied with its work, deeply concerned about the sufferings of the poor in a society becoming more and more affluent.

#### Alliterative romances

Among the **romances** written in the alliterative style are a version of Guido de Columnis’s *The Destruction of Troy*, and a splendid Alexander poem, *The Wars of*

*Alexander*. There is also a version of the Grail story *Joseph of Arimathe*. But it is generally admitted that one of the finest is the version of the life of King Arthur called the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*. This tells the story of Arthur's campaign against Rome that is found in Geoffrey of Monmouth and in Wace etc, but in a very different way. Arthur and his knights, especially Gawain, begin by fighting a just war because the emperor of Rome has challenged them. In time, though, Arthur begins to show increased ambition and terrible cruelty, the opposite of the code of chivalry. Just as he is offered the title of Roman emperor, Arthur has a dream that Fortune's wheel turns and he is toppled to destruction. He soon after learns that Mordred has taken over the kingdom of Britain, and married Guinevere.

Mordred has responded like this because Arthur would not grant him a part in the fighting. Arthur responds to Mordred's revolt with great cruelty. Guinevere becomes a nun, while Mordred and Arthur make battle. Arthur is too proud and fierce to wait for reinforcements and after killing Mordred he orders the killing of his children, before he himself dies of his wounds. He is buried in Winchester, nobody hopes for the return of such a monster.

What is remarkable here is the breakdown of the traditional codes, so that the anonymous poet seems to be writing an anti-war romance, indeed an anti-romance. The code of honour and the need to win are shown to give rise, not to wonderful feats of courage and selfless nobility, but to horrors like the revenge-killing of many Roman prisoners, or the massacre of the Roman Emperor and Senators, their bodies being sent into Rome in ironic tribute in chests intended to hold his own tribute of gold. The poet must also be thinking of the folly of the contemporary English in undertaking expansionist wars against France and obviously dislikes any idealizing of military activities.

### *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* exists in only one manuscript. It was written by an unknown poet who had obviously read other romances in French or English, and knew that the narrator does not have to tell the reader everything. It is the subtle narratorial strategy that helps make *Sir Gawain* interesting today, together with the combination of various levels of material, some highly literary and some closer to folklore. As in almost all alliterative works with the exception of *Piers Plowman*, there is a fascination with detailed descriptions of scenes and objects and like the other poems seen above, this work shows a desire to exploit a rich vocabulary for poetic effect; as a result, it is very difficult to read the poem in its original language.

The form of the poem is particular; the lines are grouped into irregular non-rhyming paragraphs or sections, each section ending with a bob-and-wheel of a short single-stress line linked to a rhyming quatrain (a-baba) of three-stress lines.

The poem begins by recalling the chronicle-history tradition of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and its own literary background:

Sithen the sege and the assaut watz sesed at Troye,  
The borgh brittened and brent to brondez and askez,  
The tulk that the trammes of tresoun ther wrought  
Watz tried for his tricherie, the trewest on erthe;  
Hit watz Ennias the athel and his highe kynde,  
That sithen depreced provinces, and patrounes bicompe  
Welneghe of al the wele in the west iles.  
From riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swythe,

With gret bobbaunce that burghe he biges upon fyrst  
 And nevenes hit his aune nome, as hit now hat;  
 Ticius to Tuskan and teldes bigynnes,  
 Langaberde in Lumbardie lyftes up homes,  
 And fer over the French flod, Felix Brutus  
 On many bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez  
     Wyth wynne,  
     Where werre and wrake and wonder  
     Bi sythez hatz wont therinne  
     And oft bothe blysse and blunder  
     Ful skete hatz skyfted synne.

Ande quen this Bretayn watz bigged bi this burn rych  
 Bolde bredden therinne, baret that lofden,  
 In mony turned tyme tene that wroghten.  
 Mo ferlyes on this folde han fallen here oft  
 Then in any other that I wot, syn that ilk tyme.  
 Bot of alle that here bult of Bretaygne kynges  
 Ay watz Arthur the hendest, as I haf herde telle.  
 Forthi an aunter in erde I attle to schawe,  
 That a selly in sight summe men hit holden  
 And an outrage awenture of Arthurez wonderez.  
 If ye wyl lysten this laye bot on little quile,  
 I schal telle hit astit, as I in toun herde,

    With tonge  
     As hit is stad and stoken  
     In stori stif and stronge  
     With lel letteres loken,  
     In londe so hatz ben longe.

(There is a modern English verse translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* Volume I.)

The mention of the story (found in other romances) of the treachery of Aeneas who is yet ‘the trewest on erthe’ and the alternation of ‘blysse and blunder’ are the first signs of one the poem’s main characteristics. The narratorial voice does not stress these words, yet once we have reached the conclusion of the story, we realize that they express its fundamental theme. Like the *Morte Arthure*, *Sir Gawain* too shows that idealism and military victory do not go well together; it is only when we have read most of the poem that we realize that the words trawthe (truth) and true are the focus of attention. Can Sir Gawain (or anyone) live in utter truth (loyalty, sincerity, integrity) in a dangerous and untruthful world?

The mention in the second stanza of the literary backgrounds is also most useful, but easily ignored. The adventure involves risks, but what is worth risking one’s life for? Reading romances is risky, too, and by both Dante and Langland was seen as likely to lead into sin. The literary reputation of Arthur is also ambiguous, for though he was a model of courtesy, he was also doomed to undergo betrayal and ultimate failure. Yet none of this strikes the uninformed reader/hearer and the narrator does nothing to warn us.

*Sir Gawain* has been much admired in the twentieth century for the unity of its plot. In the first Fitt the Green Knight appears, and offers the court a Beheading Game challenge that Sir Gawain accepts in place of the king. He cuts off the Green Knight’s head, which the

Green Knight picks up. He tells Sir Gawain to meet him at the Green Chapel in one year's time.

In the second Fitt Sir Gawain sets out into the autumn and arrives in Cheshire just before Christmas. In a large house he finds a lord and lady who, during the third Fitt, entertain him. The lord offers him an Exchange of Gifts game, in which each gives the other whatever they get each day. The lord goes hunting and gives Sir Gawain dead animals. Meanwhile his wife comes to Sir Gawain's bedroom and tries to seduce him; Sir Gawain gives the lord the kisses he receives. On the third day she offers him a green and gold girdle which she says will protect him from harm. He hides it and goes out to meet the Green Knight. In the last Fitt the return match is played out. After fainting twice the Green Knight scratches Sir Gawain's neck and then explains that he was the lord in the castle, the scratch is the punishment for not having given him the "magic" girdle. Sir Gawain is filled with deep shame but the Green Knight only laughs and compliments him.

The text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* plays many tricks on the reader, similar to the trick that the Green Knight plays. The narrator never tells his audience how to respond to events, and never points out important details, like the green and gold colour of the girdle. On a first reading, the surprise ending is therefore totally unexpected, and the challenge is partly to know whether Gawain's response is the also the reader's, or not.

### Lyric Poetry in England

Fowles in the frith	<i>(The birds in the wood</i>
The fisshes in the flood	<i>The fishes in the sea</i>
And I mon waxe wood	<i>And I must go mad</i>
Much sorwe I walke with	<i>I live with much sorrow</i>
For beste of boon and blood	<i>For best of bone and blood)</i>

A poem like this attracts attention today because it is so ambivalent or unclear; it is quite impossible to decide if it is a complete work or a fragment, if it is a love poem or a religious poem, even. It shows how the medieval lyrics often use Nature as a mirror for human emotions, and since it appears in a manuscript with a melody, it also reminds us that lyric poetry is originally meant to be sung.

Another poem is just as short, though less obscure:

Now gooth sunne under woode	<i>(Now goes son/sun under wood</i>
Me reweth Marye thy faire rode	<i>I pity, Mary, thy fair face</i>
Now gooth sunne under tree	<i>Now goes sun/son under tree</i>
Me reweth Marye the sone and thee	<i>I pity, Mary, thy Son</i> <i>and thee)</i>

Although Chaucer is credited as the author of a few joking lyric poems, there is no named lyric poet as such in England at this time. All the poems are anonymous, usually contained in manuscripts that offer a mixture of works of different kinds. In the middle ages there was no clear division between religious and secular since all life was under God.

Perhaps because the sophisticated classes could still read French, most of the English lyrics are simpler and more popular. Even the love songs are simpler and heartier than courtly love would demand:

My lief is faren in londe	<i>(My love has gone away)</i>
Allas, why is she so?	

And I am so sore bonde (*strictly bound*)  
I may nat come her to  
She hath myn herte in holde (*she has possession of my heart*)  
Wherever she ride or go  
With trewe love a thousand fold.

Although some are quite short:

Westron wind, when will thou blow?  
The small rain down can rain.  
Christ, that my love were in my arms,  
And I in my bed again.

Others are longer and wittier:

I have a gentil cok  
Croweth me day  
He doth me risen early  
My matins for to say.  
I have a gentle cok  
Comen he is of gret (*of high pedigree*)  
His comb is of red corel  
His tayel is of jet.

I have a gentle cok  
Comen he is of kind  
His comb is of red corel  
His tail is of inde.

His legges ben of asor (*azure-blue*)  
So gentil and so smale  
His spores arn of silver white (*spurs*)  
Into the worte-wale. (*roots*)

His eynen arn of cristal (*eyes*)  
Loken all in aumber (*enclosed in amber*)  
And every night he percheth him  
In min ladyes chaumber.

There are also poems that defy classification and interpretation:

Lully, lullay, lully, lullay,  
The faucon hath borne my make away. (*falcon; mate*)

He bare him up, he bare him down,  
He bare him into an orchard brown.

In that orchard there was an hall  
That was hanged with purple and pall. (*black*)

And in that hall ther was a bed  
It was hanged with gold so red.

And in that bed ther lith a knight  
His woundes bleeding by day and night.

By that beddes side ther kneeleth a may (maiden)  
And she weepeth both night and day.

And by that beddes side there standeth a stoon (stone)  
Corpus Christi writen theron.

This poem is called *The Corpus Christi Carol* and it seems to have been very popular. There are echoes of the mythical figure of the wounded Fisher King of *Perceval* in it, and it may suggest that this is linked to the daily celebration by the Church of Christ's suffering in the Mass (*Corpus Christi* means the Body of Christ). By far the larger part of the most admired lyrics are religious, touching expressions of simple piety to Jesus, the suffering Jesus especially, and to Mary his mother:

I sing of a maiden  
That is makeless: (spotless)  
King of alle kinges  
To her sone she chees. (chose)

He cam also stille  
Ther his mother was  
As dewe in Aprille  
That falleth on the gras.

He cam also stille  
To his modres bowr (chamber)  
As dewe in Aprille  
That falleth on the flowr. (flower)

He cam also stille  
Ther his moder lay  
As dewe in Aprille  
That falleth on the spray.

Moder and maiden (mother and virgin)  
Was nevere noon but she  
Wel may swich a lady  
Godes moder be.

One of the only lyric poets whose name we know is John Grimestone, who wrote (or copied) this Christian poem in 1372:

Love me broughte  
And love me wroughte  
Man to be thy fere. (companion)



Love me fedde  
And love me ledde  
And love me lettet here. (left)

Love me slew  
and love me drew  
And love me laid on bier.  
Love is my peace  
For love I ches (chose)  
Man to buyen dear.

Ne dread thee nought  
I have thee sought  
Bothen day and night.  
To haven thee  
Well is me  
I have thee wonnen in fight.

### Lyric Poetry in France

It is striking that there is no sign of any attempt in England to imitate, or translate, the sophisticated lyrics written in France in the 12th and 13th century. Sophisticated love-games and skilled satires of society are both missing. The 14th century in France, too, was a period when the lyric was less central. The most important French lyric poet of the time was **Guillaume de Machaut** (1300-77) from northern France, who wrote a number of longer love-debate poems that Chaucer knew, but is chiefly noted for having fixed the forms of the poems known in French as *ballade* and *rondeau* that were very popular into the Renaissance. Machaut was most famous as a composer, and his poems are designed to be sung. His music is still performed.

Another French poet, **Eustache Deschamps** (1346-1406) wrote patriotic and satirical poems, but he is mostly famous in England for his *ballade* in honour of Chaucer whom he terms *grant translateur*, perhaps for his work on the *Romance of the Rose*. This is the first time that an English poet is noticed abroad. At this time, the strongly clerical anti-feminism of Jean de Meung's continuation of the *Romance of the Rose* was being challenged, by Machaut for example. There is only one woman's voice clearly speaking in the 14th century, that of **Christine de Pisan** (1364-1430) and she defends women against the anti-feminist charges in many of her works. She translated Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* (On famous women) and she was one of the first poets to celebrate Joan of Arc.

### Religious Prose

One important group of religious works written in the 14th century are usually called mystical works, because their authors are mainly interested in the inner life of the individual Christian's relationship with God, and in some cases have had special spiritual experiences. They are written in prose, either in Latin or in English, and would not perhaps today be counted as literature. Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and the unknown author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* are major writers of medieval England, though, and have left their mark in various ways.

The later 13th and the 14th centuries saw many women, as well as men, eager to live intense Christian lives, in many parts of Europe. Especially in Germany this led to a major rise in the importance of women; some of the women involved were members of convents, while others lived as anchorites, or out in society. The rise of mysticism seems to correspond to a rise of the sense of individuality. In earlier times, Christianity was communal and formal, the rituals of the Church were the most important thing. The rise of the Franciscans and Dominicans corresponded to the rise of the cities, with their wealth, their freedom, and their temptations. They preached sermons designed to make each of their hearers feel more deeply the love of God, so that they could live better lives. Now comes a new step for a few people of special sensitivity, called the Mystical Way or the Way of Contemplation: through Purgation, by Illumination, to Perfection and Union.

One of the most famous mystics of the period was a German, **Meister Eckhart** (1260-1328), who was a Dominican with many contacts among the devout women, especially in the convents. He stressed the possibility of an intense experience of union with God, and a need for total detachment from the things and thoughts of this world. The 14th century saw some of Europe's greatest mystics: the German Dominicans Johan Tauler (1300-1361) and Heinrich Suso (1295-1365), the Flemish John of Ruysbroek (1293-1381), St Bridget of Sweden (died 1373), and St Catherine of Siena (died 1380), as well as Gerard Groote (1340-84) who founded the Brothers of the Common Life, the origin of the 15th century spirituality known as the *devotio moderna* which produced the *Imitatio Christi* (Imitation of Christ) of Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471).

Many mystics wrote to guide and encourage devout women. This is true of **Richard Rolle** (1300-1349), who went when he was nineteen to live as a poor hermit in Yorkshire. His whole life was spent in prayer, and writing in English and in Latin, in prose and verse. Like St Bernard of Citeaux, he stresses the sweetness and warmth of personal experience of the love of God. He expresses and encourages enthusiasm rather than the more austere forms of negative mysticism, in works such as the Latin "Fire of Love" and the English "Ego Dormio. He was the most popular English spiritual writer of his time. Another popular work was the "Scale of Perfection" written by **Walter Hilton** (died 1396) for a woman recluse. This work is simple, easy to read, and full of good sense.

It has to be remembered that the deepest mystical tradition in Christianity, the apophatic or negative way, was very much influenced by the works of the 5th century writer usually called the pseudo-Dionysius, especially by his *Mystica Theologia*. He stresses the paradox of all relationship with God: God cannot be seen, known, or imagined, yet the goal of Christian life is to see, know, and love God. Above all, in order to encounter the All of God, human persons have to pass through a Nothing which is experienced as Darkness and Cloud, a dark night of the soul. Like in the story of Moses, God's light can only be found in this darkness, he can only be seen veiled by a cloud.

The greatest work of this tradition in English is today called *The Cloud of Unknowing*, although the full title is "A *book of Contemplation, the which is called The Clowde of Unknowyng, in the which a soule is onyd (one-ed) with God*". It begins in strict fashion (*spelling modernized*):

I charge thee and I beseech thee, with as much power and virtue as the bond of charity is sufficient to suffer, whatsoever thou be that this book shalt have in possession, either by property or by keeping, by bearing as messenger or else by borrowing that in as much as in thee is by will and avisement, neither thou read it, nor write it, nor speak it, nor yet suffer it to be read, written, or spoken, of any or to any, but if it be of such one or to such one that hath, by thy supposing, in a true will and by a holy intent, purposed him to be a perfect follower of Christ, not only in active living

but in the sovereignest point of contemplative living the which is possible by grace for to be come to in this present life of a perfect soul yet abiding in this deadly body; and thereto that doth that in him is, and, by thy supposing, hath done long time before, for to able him to contemplative living by the virtuous means of active living. For else it accordeth nothing to him.

The matter of the *Cloud* is too difficult to be gone into here; it should only be noted that the deep and lively style of the prose is exceptional.

### Julian of Norwich

On May 8, 1373 a thirty-year old woman called Julian fell seriously ill, everyone including herself thought she was dying. Just as she was about to lose consciousness, she began to experience a series of sixteen visions, mostly centered on the sufferings of Christ. She recovered and twenty years later wrote down the lessons that she had learned by thinking about what she saw then. The most celebrated passages in her *Revelations of Divine Love* are these:

(Chapter 5) Our Lord showed a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut in the palm of my hand; and it was as round as a ball. I looked thereupon with eye of my understanding, and thought: ‘What may this be?’ And it was generally answered thus: ‘It is all that was made.’ I marvelled how it might last, for me thought it might suddenly have fallen to nought for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: ‘It lasteth and ever shall, for God loveth it; and so all thing hath the being by the love of God.’ In this little thing I saw three properties: the first is that God made it, the second is that God loveth it, the third, that God keepeth it. But what is to me soothly the Maker, the Keeper, and the Lover, I cannot tell; for, till I am substantially one-ed to him, I may never have full rest nor very bliss...

(Chapter 27) Me thought if sin had not been, we should all have been clean and like to our Lord as he made us; and thus, in my folly, aforon this time often I wondered why by the great forseeing wisdom of God the beginning of sin was not letted (prevented); for then, thought me, all should have been well... But Jesus, that in this vision informed me of all that me needeth, answered by this word and said: ‘Sin is behovable, but all shall be wel, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’

T. S. Eliot used these last words at the end of the poem “Little Gidding” in his *Four Quartets*:

And all shall be well and  
All manner of things shall be well  
When the tongues of flames are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one.

Julian became a recluse, living enclosed in a small house joined to a church in the city of Norwich, from which she could attend services through a window opening into the church, living a life of prayer and meditation, and guiding other people who wanted advice about prayer and Christian living.

## Margery Kempe

One day around 1415, a woman called **Margery Kempe** visited the Lady Julian in her cell and spent several days with her. About ten years later Margery Kempe dictated the story of her life to a priest, who wrote it down. It is one of the first autobiographies written in English; yet it was only discovered in the twentieth century.

Margery Kempe was born in about 1373, and she considered that her life was worth telling about because of all the religious experiences she felt she had had. She was a highly emotional person, and seems to have spent a lot of time crying. Modern readers may feel that she was mostly the victim of her own imagination, and that she had read too many biographies of true mystics. The way she tells her life is very entertaining in itself. She had many enemies; in addition she travelled all over Europe and as far as Jerusalem, and offers a fascinating glimpse of what a woman's life could be like in the 14th-15th centuries.

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