

Literature of the Period

Anglo-Saxon Literature Anglo-Saxon literature began not with books, but with spoken verse and incantations. The reciting of poems often occurred on ceremonial occasions, such as the celebration of military victories.

Anglo-Saxon Poetry This early verse falls mainly into two categories: heroic poetry, recounting the achievements of warriors, and elegiac poetry, lamenting the deaths of loved ones and the loss of the past. The long poem *Beowulf* is the most famous example of heroic poetry, whereas a famous elegiac poem is "The Wanderer."

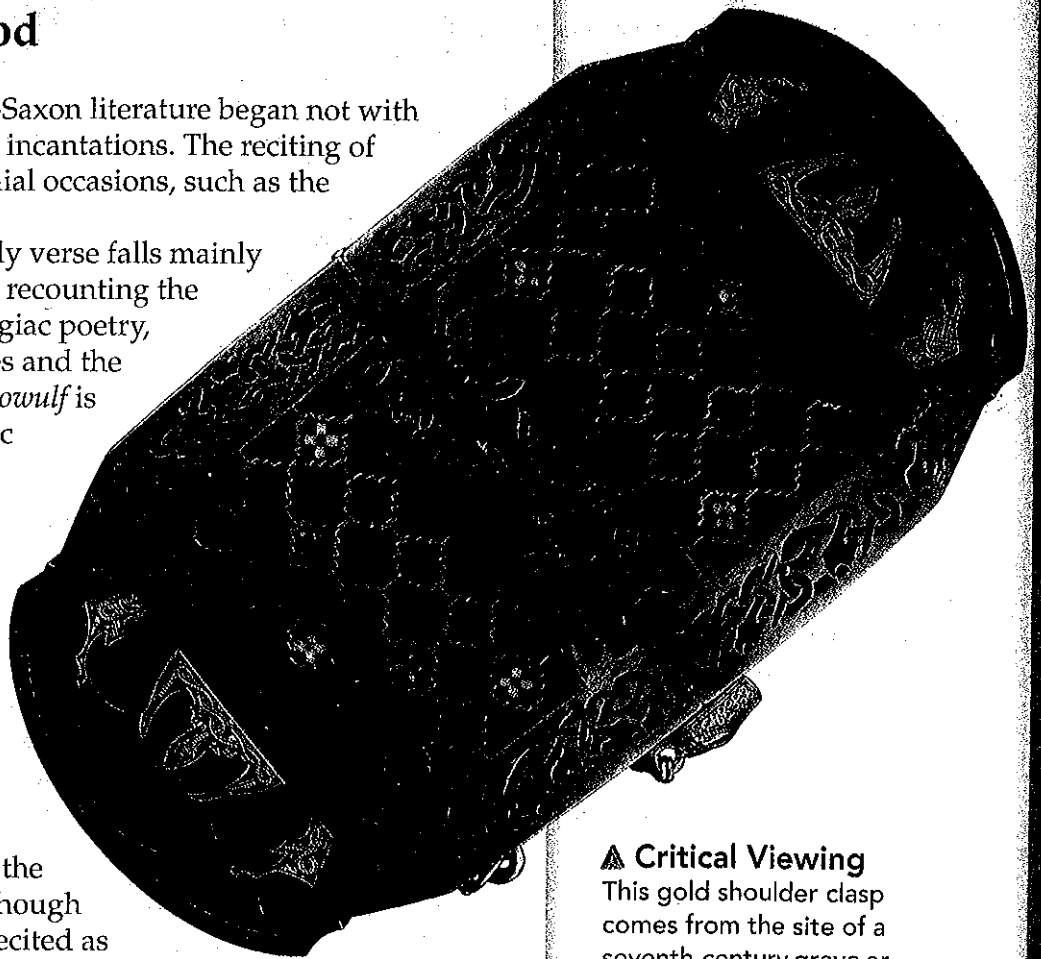
Beowulf This epic, or long heroic poem, is the story of a great legendary warrior renowned for his courage, strength, and dignity. Because it is the first such work known to have been composed in the English language, it is considered the national epic of England.

Like most Anglo-Saxon poets, the author of *Beowulf* is unknown. Although versions of the poem were likely recited as early as the sixth century, the text that we have today was composed in the eighth century and not written down until the eleventh. Thus, the poem includes many references to Christian ideas and Latin classics. Clearly evident in *Beowulf*, however, are the values of a warrior society, especially those of dignity, bravery, and prowess in battle.

Anglo-Saxon Prose Before the reign of Alfred the Great, all important prose written in the British Isles was composed in Latin. The monks who transcribed these works regarded the vernacular, the language of the common people, as a "vulgar tongue." The greatest of England's Latin scholars was the Venerable Bede (673–735), whose *History of the English Church and People* gives an account of England from the Roman invasion to his own time.

Another great work of prose from this time is *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, the name given to a group of historical journals written and compiled in monasteries. Unlike Bede's *History*, these records were written in Old English, the earliest form of our own language.

Literature of the English Middle Ages During this period, the first true dramas emerged, the poet Geoffrey Chaucer created a vivid picture of medieval life, romances portrayed the deeds of knights, and anonymous balladeers sang of love and deeds of outlaws.



▲ Critical Viewing

This gold shoulder clasp comes from the site of a seventh-century grave or commemorative tomb for an Anglo-Saxon king. It is comparable to items buried with Beowulf.

Why do you think Anglo-Saxons buried such items with their royal dead?

[Infer]

Medieval Drama During early Norman times, the Church often sponsored plays as part of religious services. In time, these plays moved from the church building to the churchyard and then to the marketplace. The earliest dramas were miracle plays, or mystery plays, that retold stories from the Bible or dealt with aspects of the lives of saints.

During the turbulent fifteenth century, a new kind of drama arose: the morality play. Morality plays depicted the lives of ordinary people and taught moral lessons.

An Emerging National Identity In 1454, a German silversmith, Johann Gutenberg, perfected a process of printing from movable type. Printing then spread rapidly throughout Europe, and, in 1476, William Caxton set up the first movable-type press in England. English literature no longer needed to be hand-copied by church scribes.

One of Caxton's first projects was the printing of Geoffrey Chaucer's work. Chaucer wrote in Middle English, a language quite close to English as it is spoken today. After centuries of the ebb and flow of conquerors and their languages, the island of England had finally settled on a national identity of its own.

Geoffrey Chaucer Poet Geoffrey Chaucer was born into the merchant class that was adding to the wealth of London and the nation. Chaucer's father was a wine merchant, and young Geoffrey grew up amid the bustle of a successful international business. As a teenager, he entered an aristocratic household as a servant. This apprenticeship led to a career in which he served the nobility as a capable administrator. Chaucer's perch in society, just below the aristocracy, gave him a perfect vantage point for observing all kinds of people.

Nowhere does Chaucer display his keen powers of observation better than in *The Canterbury Tales*. This work, planned as an exchange of tales among pilgrims journeying to the shrine of martyr Thomas Becket at Canterbury, gave Chaucer the opportunity to show a cross section of medieval society. In doing so, he moved literature beyond the themes of courtly love and knightly adventure that dominated the many medieval tales called romances. His compassionate humor and lively realism make him one of the first modern writers.

Although Chaucer completed only 22 of the 120 tales that scholars think he planned to write, these 22 exhibit a great variety. They include the tale of chivalry told by the Knight, the *fabliaux* (French for "short stories")



▲ Critical Viewing

In the late fifteenth century, the movable-type press began to play an important role in society. This set of letters and its designed border were produced by William Caxton's printing device. Speculate about the effect this device had on English society. [Speculate]

told by the Miller and the Reeve, the animal fable told by the Nun's Priest, and the story based on a fairy tale told by the Merchant. The highly moral Parson, when asked to contribute a tale, declines to tell an "idle story" like those of the other pilgrims. This passage shows how Chaucer introduces a greater dimension of realism by having his fictional storytellers describe their tales and react to previous ones.

Romances, Lyrics, and Ballads

Medieval romances were tales describing the adventures of knights. The most popular romances told about King Arthur. For centuries after their defeat by the Anglo-Saxons, the Celts had told stories of this great Celtic hero. Inasmuch as historians cannot say for certain whether Arthur actually lived or not, tales about him are considered legends, a blend of fact and fiction. When the Normans were battling the Anglo-Saxons, they became interested in the old Celtic legends. Because of the Normans' French ties, the tales of Arthur spread not only in England but also in France. In the fifteenth century, Sir Thomas Malory collected these tales in his book *Morte d'Arthur* ("The Death of Arthur").

Europeans of the Middle Ages had a fondness for a harplike instrument called the lyre. In palaces and castles, poets often strummed lyres as they recited their verse. From this custom, English lyric poetry developed. Lyric poems of this period fall into two main categories: secular and religious. The usual topics of secular poetry are love and nature. Religious lyrics might consist of a hymn praising God or a prayer of supplication.

Another popular poetic form was the ballad, a folk song that told a story. Experts find most surviving ballads impossible to date. One series concerns Robin Hood, a legendary hero who may have existed around the turn of the thirteenth century. An outlaw, Robin lives in the woods with his band of "merry" men, robbing from the rich and helping the poor.



▲ Critical Viewing

(a) Which of these two figures is probably Robin Hood? Why? (b) What does the artist's portrayal of Robin Hood suggest about his way of life, his abilities, and his motives? [Analyze]

Two Funerals

To get an overview of British literature, you might begin with two funerals. These ceremonies occur 1,500 years apart, but each honors a person of great importance. Between these two solemn public events—one real and one fictional—the story of British literature unfolds.

One occurred on Saturday, September 6, 1997. It was the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales. You yourself might have been among the estimated 2.5 billion people worldwide to watch the services for Diana, killed in a tragic auto accident.

The other funeral, from the beginnings of British history and literature, honored Beowulf. He was the king of a Germanic tribe living in southern Sweden, probably during the early sixth century A.D. His death came, after a glorious lifetime of killing enemies and monsters, in a desperate battle with a dragon.

from Beowulf

Translated by Seamus Heaney

The Geat people built a pyre for Beowulf,
stacked and decked it until it stood four-square,
hung with helmets, heavy war-shields
and shining armor, just as he had ordered.
5 Then his warriors laid him in the middle of it,
mourning a lord far-famed and beloved.
On a height they kindled the hugest of all
funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke
billowed darkly up, the blaze roared
10 and drowned out their weeping, wind died down
and flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house,
burning it to the core. They were disconsolate
and wailed aloud for their lord's decease.

from "A Farewell to the 'People's Princess'"

by Dan Balz (*The Washington Post*)

LONDON, Sept. 6—In precedent-shattering ceremonies that were at once sorrowful and uplifting, Diana, Princess of Wales, was remembered today as a woman of "natural nobility" whose life of compassion and style transcended sometimes abusive press coverage and even the royal family itself. Later she was laid to rest on her family's estate, concluding one of the most extraordinary weeks in the modern history of Britain. . . .

A Story Told in Literature A comparison of these funerals shows that in 1,500 years, warring male-centered tribes that valued physical courage and loyalty became a nation of male and female citizens who valued concern for all those in need and the honest expression of feelings as much as physical courage. British literature both recorded and influenced this dramatic change.

The Changing English Language

The Beginnings of English

BY RICHARD LEDERER

ENGLISH

The rise of English as a planetary language is an unparalleled success story that began long ago, in the middle of the fifth century A.D. Several large tribes of sea rovers—the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes—lived along the continental North Sea coast, from Denmark to Holland. Around A.D. 449, these Teutonic plunderers sailed across the water and invaded the islands then known as Britannia. They found the land pleasant and the people easy to conquer, so they remained there. They brought with them a Low Germanic tongue that, in its new setting, became Anglo-Saxon, or Old English. In A.D. 827, King Egbert first named Britannia *Englaland*, “land of the Angles.”

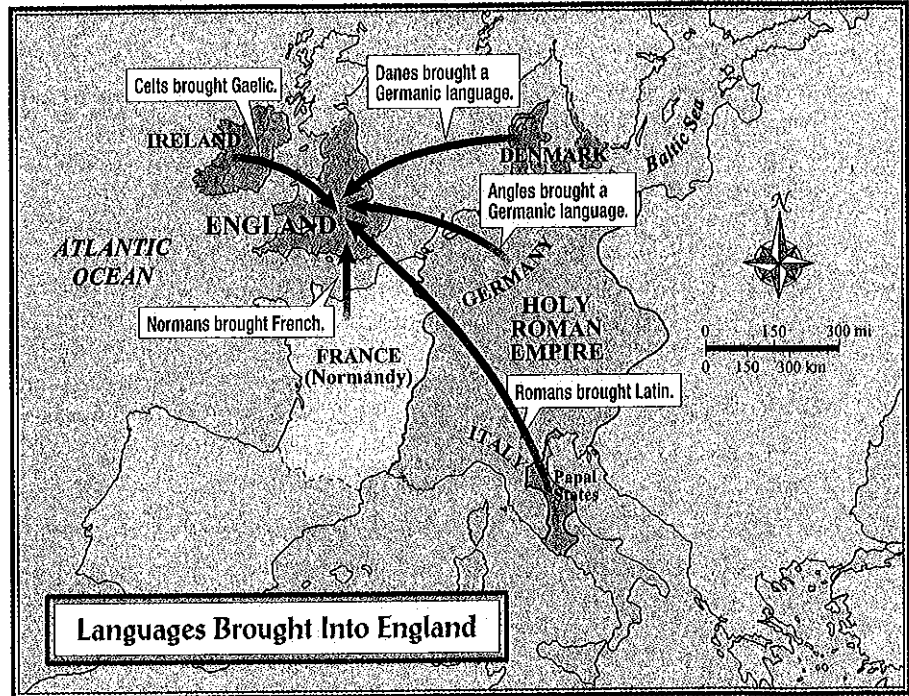
The language came to be called *Englisc*. Old Englisc differs so much from modern English that it is harder for us to learn than German is. Still, we can recognize a number of Anglo-Saxon words: *bedd*, *candel*, *eorth*, *freondscipe*, *mann*, *moder*, and *waeter*. Anglo-Saxon words such as these concern the unchanging basics of life. They survived subsequent social upheavals nearly unmodified. English was to gain its more sophisticated words from other languages, as in the case of the multitude of scientific terms that derive from Latin and Greek.

MIDDLE ENGLISH

A dramatic evolution in the language came after yet another conquest of England, this one by the Norman French two centuries after the rule of Egbert. The new conquerors came from Normandy, a province of France. These Normans (shortened from *Northmen*) had originally been Viking freebooters from Scandinavia, but they now spoke French and had taken to French customs.

In 1066, under William, Duke of Normandy, the Normans invaded England. In a bloody battle at Hastings they conquered the Saxons and Danes who resisted them, killed the Saxon king, Harold, and forced the nobles to choose Duke William as king of England.

One result was that Old Englisc was flooded by the French spoken by the Normans. Examples of French influence include the words *sir*, *madam*, *courtesy*, *honor*, *chivalry*, *dine*, *table*, *roast*, *court*, and *royal*. From this infusion of French words emerged a tongue that today we call Middle English.



Activity

Read the opening verse of the Prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and look for the words *March*, *shires*, and *martyr*. Research the origins of these words to gain a fuller understanding of their meanings. Then, write briefly about what their diverse origins suggest about the history of the English language itself.