

LECTURE 2. The literature of the Norman period (12-13th centuries), its general characteristics. The literature of the 14th century and the formation of the English language. Geoffrey Chaucer. The Canterbury Tales. Chaucer's contribution to literature. Folk-songs and ballads. The Robby Hood Ballads.

Plan.

The Anglo-French period, the age of chivalry. Chivalric romances. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Literature written in Latin: *Historia novorum*, *Historia regum Anglorum*, *Historia Anglorum*, *Histroia Britonum* 1132-1137 (Geoffrey of Monmouth about King Arthur). French influence on English literature.

Thomas Malory (~1417-1471) - *Morte d'Arthur* (1469). Literature of XIV c. – formation of literary English. John Wyclif (1324-1384),

William Langland – *The Vision of Piers the Ploughman*. Geoffrey Chaucer Literature of XV c. – mystery plays and morality plays, ballads.

The invasion of Normans in 1066 when the Norman duke William crossed the Channel and conquered the England in the great battle fought at Hastings, not only brought the terror of sword and the strong hand of conquest, but more important, they became the transmitters to England of French culture and literature. Within a half-century the Anglo-Saxon nobility and landed gentry had been completely displaced by Normans, while the English Church had been filled with French monks and priests, so that all those classes were forced to read and learned literature of Norman-French. Furthermore, the constant contact of the Anglo-Norman nobility with France made them the medium through which England became thoroughly familiar with French literary material and literary forms. Although the Anglo-Saxon population continued to employ only the English language, in the public places – courts, Parliament, school French alone was spoken, while in the monastery and church reading, writing and conversation were all carried on in Latin. The literature which was in demand, and which consequently came to constitute the entire repertory of the minstrels – previous gleeman and scop – was exclusively in the French, much of it composed by Normans and Frenchmen in England, much of it produced on the Continent and brought across the channel by wandering minstrels. These works of Anglo-French fall into two divisions: narrative and didactic. The narrative includes romances, and tales, ballads, the didactic – history, saints' lives and miracles, and a number of works which may be called utilitarian. Besides these, there are also preserved numerous lyrical and satirical poems, and some plays. The variety of works in Latin is wide. In the field of pure literature are satires and drinking-songs, love-songs, church hymns, biblical and miracle plays. About 1200 English again began to appear in a few books, disputing a

place by the side of the elegant language of the conquerors. Its reappearance however reveals it to be a greatly changed language. By 1350 English was again assuming the position of the speech of culture, its grammar was still further simplified; its inflectional endings were lost. Medieval literature was disseminated in two ways. The first and more permanent method was through copying by scribes some didactic or religious works. The second one was circulated by the minstrels, who travel from place to place spreading **the metrical romances/chivalric Romances/ medieval romance**. It is a type of narrative that developed in 12-c. in France, and displaced the earlier epic and heroic forms. At first they were all in Norman-French. Many of the stories came from old French sources, the language of which was a Romanic dialect, and for that reason these works were called “romances”. They were brought to England by medieval poets called ‘trouveres’ /finders/, who came from France with the Norman conquerors. Later in England such poets were called minstrels, and their art of composing romances and ballads and singing them to the accompaniment of a lute was called the art of minstrelsy. A number of romances were based on Celtic legends, especially those about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. The heroes of these romances, unlike the characters of Church literature, were human beings who loved, hated and suffered. Their worship of fair ladies motivated the plots of the stories. The change during the 11th-13th centuries to romances of chivalry is a part of the rise of feudalism. A knight’s duty to serve God and the King had a religious orientation and a legal force; it was not just an honor code in lit. Chivalry was historical as well as literary; its cultural prestige was spread through Romance. They were tales of adventurous and honorable deeds – deeds of war, at first, but knight also fought to defend ladies, or fought for ladies, introducing a new ethos. Although romance took popular forms, it began as a courtly genre, a leisure pursuit – like playing chess. The warrior gave way to knight, and when the knight got off his horse he wooed the lady. In Lit the pursuit of love grew ever more refined.

For us, the reader of English Literature the conventions of courtly love are best known by their occurrence in the medieval romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Its date is perhaps as late quarter of the 14 c. but it is the culmination of the whole school of the preceding 2 centuries, and therefore is legitimately to be regarded as ‘Norman-French’ based on Celtic legends. This is one of the stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. It tells of the adventures of one King Arthur’s knights –sir Gawain – in a struggle against an enemy with magic powers as well as great strength and cunning. The picturesque language of the romance, alliterative meter / the number and kinds of feet in the lines of poetry/, its bright humor and fancy, its descriptions of fairy woman, as well as the skillful structure, and especially the pictures of English castle life in the Christmas holidays, and the detailed and lively accounts of the hunting of the fox and deer, all contribute to make this the most delightful example of English romance.

The stories of Arthur and his knights have attracted many British and other writers. Arthur is a bright figure of the past, a historical character and the national hero of the Celts, was described as an ideal feudal king endowed with all the virtues of a hero. He possessed magical powers, and was helped by Merlin, the cunning wizard. Arthur was honest, and wise, fair to all his vassals, the knights. They had their meetings at a round table so that all should be equal. Many tales gathered round him and his knights. An important Middle English prose work, *Morte d'Arthur* – Arthur's Death, was written by **Sir Thomas Malory/1400-1470/**. He wrote 8 separate tales of King Arthur and his knights. Malory is writer who produced a huge Arthuriad in the 15th.c. and whose book is regarded as the standard "history" of Arthur. One of the main subjects was Arthur's battles against his enemies, including the Romans. Malory's fine prose can tell a direct story well, but can also express deep feelings in musical sentences.

In this prose work, we hear the deeds of love, loyalty, and revenge performed by the great personifications of chivalry – Gawain, Lancelot, Percival and Galahad. Very largely by virtue of his imitation the style of his French originals, Malory became the master of a simple, flowing English, primitive in structure, but capable of considerable flexibility and falling into pleasant natural rhythms. The *Morte d'Arthur* was finished by 1470, it was printed in 1485, when Caxton, the first English printer, published it with an interesting preface from his own hand.

Thus, the fusion of the English and French peoples and their cultures produced important results in the metre as well as in the vocabulary and literary content of the new language. **Anglo-Saxon poetry** had depended for its rhythmical effect on two devices, alliteration and accent. **Anglo-French verse** depended upon two devices – rhyme and fixed number of syllables. The final outcome of the struggle was that English verse gave up regular alliteration, retaining it only as an occasional decoration.

Geoffrey Chaucer (?1340- 1400) is often called the founder of English literary language and poetry. He was a first medieval poet known as the "father of English poetry" whose burial in Westminster Abbey marks the beginning of the poet's corner. He was a well-educated man who read Latin, and studied French and Italian poetry, but he was not interested only in books. He traveled and made good use of his eyes, and the people whom he describes are just like living people. *The Canterbury Tales/1384/* total altogether 17,000 lines – about half of Chaucer's literary production. Collections of stories, both secular and sacred, articulated into a general framework, had been numerous and popular in the Middle Ages and early Italian Renaissance, which inherited the taste for them, had enlarged their scope and humanized their content. Chaucer developed the frame-story of the journey, dialogue, and interactions of Canterbury pilgrims to such a degree that the frame itself approximated the form of an organized plot. Within his frame-plot, each story constitutes a complete and rounded

narrative, yet functions as a means of characterizing the teller and as a vehicle for the quarrels and topics of argument. Parties of pilgrims agree to tell stories to pass the time on their journey from London to Canterbury (a town in South-Eastern England). There are 24 stories, mostly in verse, and in the stories we get to know the pilgrims themselves. Most of them, together with Chaucer there are 30 pilgrims, were the people from every level of society, except the highest and the lowest, a wide range of the new middle class, including the merchant, the lawyer, the cook, the sailor, the ploughman, the miller, they are ordinary people but each of them can be recognized as a real person with his or her own character. Chaucer made his setting national and colorful, individualized his characters so as to make of them a gallery of living portraits of his time; he employed three principal metres, the 8-syllable line, rhyming in couplets, 10 syllable line, also rhyming in couplets, and the same line arranged in 7-line stanzas, known later as 'rhyme royal'. In his famous poems "*Troilus and Crisyde*", "*Legend of Goode Wommen*" he also made endless metrical experiments and showed a mastery of intricate verse-forms. He made a literary presentation of contemporary society upon a great scale and as Gorky noted "Chaucer was the father of English language and the founder of realism". Chaucer has written a psychological novel in verse, analyzing minutely the action and reaction of character and situation upon the leading characters.

In 14th.c. the old alliterative line was still in use. *The Vision of Piers the Ploughman*, written by **William Langland** (1332-1400) is a poem in this verse. He was a poet who introduced a genre of vision in English literature. /Vision, something seen in the imagination as it in a dream; a vision is often a sight of things in the future./ The poem is a series of dreams or visions. The poem *Piers the Ploughman* is a dream allegory. Vice and Virtue /The evil qualities of man are called 'vice' and the moral qualities of man are called 'virtue'/ are spoken of as if they were human beings.

The fifteenth century was more important for popular literature than for the artful literature addressed to the upper classes: it was the age of many excellent songs, secular and religious, and of *folk ballads*, as well as the flowering time of the *miracle* and *morality plays*, which were written and produced for the general public.

The English popular **ballad** used to be regarded as a variety of folk-art, communally produced. It defined as a narrative poem without any known author. It is originally a song for dancers; in medieval times a simple poem transmitted orally with short stanzas telling a story for signing, reciting or dancing. English and Scottish ballads were either **lyrical**—epic poems (these were narratives) or lyrical-dramatic poems (incidents in action). As regards the content, the ballads may be divided into 3 groups: historical, heroic, and romantic ballads. Historical ballads were based on a historical fact, while heroic ballads were about people who were persecuted by the law or by their own families. Among the most popular ones were those about Robin Hood.

The first English plays told religious stories and were performed in or near the churches. Many events of religious history were suitable subjects for drama. These early plays called: **Miracle or Mystery plays**, the subjects of them are various: the disobedience of Adam and Eve; Noah and the great flood, Abraham and Issac; events in the life of Christ and so on. They were acted by people of the town on a kind of stage on wheels called a pageant. Other plays, in some respects not very different from the Miracles, were the **Morality Plays**. The characters in these were not people such as Adam and Eve or Noah; they were virtues such as truth, piety, kindness, honesty, or bad qualities such as greed or revenge which walked and talked. The plays presented moral truths in a new and effective way. One of the best-known 15th C. **Moralities** is *Everyman*, which was translated from the Dutch. It is the story of the end of Everyman's life, when death calls him away from the world. Among the characters are Beauty, Knowledge, strength, and Good Deeds. When Everyman has to go to face Death, all his friends leave him except Good deeds, who says finely:

Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide, in thy most need to be by thy side.

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