

## Post Classical Literature: Western Europe

**Overview** Between the 'Fall of Rome,' arguably datable to the fifth century C.E., and the cultural-economic opening out we call the Renaissance, in the fifteenth century C.E., is long enough for literary styles to revise themselves many times, and so they did, although the pervasive influence of the Christian messages is everywhere noticeable. If we travel in mind among a half dozen selections from the literature of this extensive period, in which Western Europe passes through stages of virtual economic shutdown, Feudalism, slow recouping of trade energies, the 'rebirth' of classical awareness, and the spreading of the first western cities, there is space for immense reshaping of cultural perspectives. If we have any trouble believing this, we can refer to the changes in cultural perspective that punctuate the course of even a single century, in our frenetic contemporary world.

**Augustine** In the fifth century C.E., the prolific Bishop of Hippo, in North Africa, found both a perspective and a personal voice in which to create a personal literature unlike any created in the Greco-Roman world, with the possible exception of the writings of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, in his *Meditations* (161-180 C.E.). As we see most vividly in his *Confessions* (400 C.E.), Augustine writes from the heart to his Creator, before whom he confesses his weakness and susceptibility to sin. He writes a spiritual autobiography in which he recollects the sinful tendencies of his infancy, his youth, his hormonal sexual drives and actions, and the saving blessing reserved for him by his mother, who remained true to him throughout his spiritual wanderings. His discovery of the inner life begins and ends with such a thought as 'my sin is always before me,' from his masterwork, *The City of God* (426 C.E.)

**Beowulf** Three centuries after Augustine, the epic of *Beowulf* picks up the deep Christian currents, which have been percolating across the Christianization of western Europe. This mystery text, virtually unknown in the West until the 18th century, springs on us with the power of ancient classical epics--pitting the hero against misty forces of monstrous gloom, death, and political hostility, then moving us through deeply touching scenes into a sense of the hero's nobility. Beowulf is conscious, at all times, of his creatureliness, and even in the midst of prideful heroic battle, remains humbly conscious of his dependence on his maker. 'Most often He has guided the man without friends....' declares the poet, referring to the hero's lowliness, in a tone which would have blown away Homer's mind, as he takes us joyfully through the proud exultations of Odysseus.

**The Song of Roland** Fast forward two centuries from the murky Scandinavian/Anglian struggles of *Beowulf*, and you are reading a totally different Christian-flavored epic, featuring Roland the nephew of the French King Charlemagne. *The Song of Roland* (1040-1115 C.E.) was created at the time of the First Crusade, when France was eager to complete the expulsion of the Saracens from Spain, thus from Western Europe entirely. Roland and his troops, engaged in full scale battle against the 'invaders,' fight a rear guard action in which ultimately they are routed--though by a last minute attack Charlemagne and his forces arrive for the rescue, and annihilate the Saracens. The 'preux chevalier', 'noble knight,' Roland is faced, in the course of this battle, with the choice of whether or not to blow his famed horn, which will be a cry for help; in his humble, and noble efforts to meet this challenge to his honor, Roland's god-fearing soul is laid bare on the table.

**Dante** Dante Alighieri completed his master epic, *The Divine Comedy*, in 1320 C.E. The wellsprings of personal godliness opened by Augustine, eight hundred years earlier, here find their narrative counterpart in an objective framework capable of capturing their intellectual power and emotional richness. Dante follows his mentors, Virgil and later Beatrice, along a series of paths and gaps in the long trail leading from the realms of reason, through those of Purgatory, to the final ascent into heavenly light, the divine Source. At every stage on the way Dante meets representatives of that particular level of brutality or spiritualization--sinners shining with the most brilliant autobiographies. Dante, a humble pilgrim, drags himself upward, though in constant dependence on 'divine guidance.'

**Chaucer** Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1476 C.E.) are deeply woven into a Christian culture, and turn upon a narrative as religiously shaped as Dante's narrative in the *Divine Comedy*. When Chaucer's parson declares the purpose of his tale to be

*...to guide your way one further stage  
Upon that perfect, glorious pilgrimage  
Called the celestial, to Jerusalem...*

he formulates a pure Christian motive for art. As with Dante, we are introduced, in Chaucer, to a loosely congregated sub section of the day's society. (Dante's 'characters' were both contemporary and historical, while Chaucer's are all contemporary.) While all of Chaucer's figures are on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury, and while the majority are not 'people of the cloth,' and some are pretty rough characters, the motif of Christian seeking remains thematic, and often, as in the words of the parson, decisive.

### **Reading**

Curtius, Ernst Robert, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Trask, Princeton, 1953.

Green, D.H., *Women Readers in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 2007.

### **Discussion questions**

We chose to track a 'religious theme' for guidance through the complexities of mediaeval literature. What other themes might serve the same purpose? Stylistic? Linguistic? Sociological?

Are Chaucer's *Tales*, which 'come at the end of the High Christian Era, essentially a social portrait which just happens to include Christian issues and personalities, as parts of the culture they are in? Or is Christianity a determining factor in the epic?

If you buy the notion that Augustine is a new kind of interior voyager, in western literature, where and how does Greco Roman literature find its own center of excellence? What kind of Greco-Roman works seem to you to be 'spiritual,' if any do?