

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

## ENGLISH LITERATURE – Postclassical Period (to ca. 1485)

### *Medieval English Literature*

Medieval English literature generally consists of work that was written in the emerging vernacular, spoken and written by the Anglo-Saxons. As the language evolved, Old English (varieties of Anglo-Saxon discourse) evolved into Middle English. The blended language thus constructed is rich in terms and vocabulary, and the works produced in Anglo Saxon English provide insight into the beliefs of the times, as well as social and political arrangements. The early Christian church was a dominant, unifying force in a time of warring nobles, while political and community leadership were largely involved with kinship ties.

The text with which we will begin this Unit, *Beowulf*, is early material, in which Germanic and Old Norse, as well as Anglo-Saxon literary elements are present, and in which we glimpse early English culture before it has passed into the more international blend of Anglo-Saxon which forms the basis of today's English.

***Beowulf***(A, 26-97) Anonymous 8<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.

Western literatures typically debut with an epic which characterizes the founding spirit of the nation/state in question. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—and a great number of ancient Greek epic poems now lost, the epic cycle—served that purpose; so did Virgil's *Aeneid*, and, in France, *The Song of Roland* (12<sup>th</sup> century). *Beowulf* is the earliest preserved epic of English literature, and though its language is more nearly Germanic than what was to become English, this poem touches on themes and issues which were to make themselves formative in subsequent literature in English. Heroism abounds, in this tale of tribal quid pro quos and warrior codes, a tale which embeds Beowulf himself in the soil of early Germanic literature—like the *Nibelungenlied*. But the poet of Beowulf, probably a Christian, probes through epic spiritual possibilities which transcend the heroic warrior code. At the heart of this drama lies the conflict of Beowulf, himself a pagan, to subdue the incarnate evil of the dragon Grendel. Throughout the narrative there is a continuous sense of the cruelty of passing time, and of the human's short tenure of life. This sense assures a unique elegiac dignity to *Beowulf*.

*Question: National Literatures and their Origins*

*Beowulf* is the first work of powerful imagination to grow from the English (or pre English) basis of the language of the British Isles. It is thus worth reflecting on the stamp provided by this text, which though barely known to readers of English until our own times, casts a shadow of greatness over the literary culture to follow it. Like much epic literature *Beowulf* embraces themes of heroism, love and fidelity, death, the aging process, and the dignity of death. Has your own literary tradition some such looming originary text in its background? Has American—as distinct from British—literature such a foundational text? The answer (as I see it) is probably no, for great literature was not a starting point for the American cultural world. That starting point, I would guess, was the American Constitution, or perhaps Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791). What do you think?

*Comparative Literature:*

1. *Beowulf* shares with the work of other epic traditions a concern with the heroic past. Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Inferno*—though in different senses—all concern a real/fictional past which underlies them. The great national epic of India, the *Mahabharata*, unfolds against a misty blend of tale and historical memory, which links the work to a remote past. Do you see some connection between this past orientation and the oral quality of much epic poetry?

2. *Beowulf* intersects with archeology at many points, the text being confirmed by barrows, funeral tumuli, place names, and artifacts, such as those found at the treasure burial site of Sutton Hoo in southern England. In other words these confirming sites and objects leave us in no doubt about the historical, as well as the legendary/fictive elements of the epic. The oldest epic literature worldwide has been intertwined with history, as is most famously illustrated in the case of Homer's *Iliad*. (Heinrich Schliemann's excavations at Troy, to ground our understanding of Homer's text, are only the most dramatic example of the service of archeology in filling out such understanding.) Do you think that archeological discoveries can advance our understanding of the epic as *literature*?

**Geoffrey Chaucer** 1343-1400 *Canterbury Tales* (A, 168-266)

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in London about 1340, to a family of French descent who had made their fortune in the wine trade. It was Chaucer's fortune to have been brought up near the Wine-Trade docks of the River Thames, where he had a chance to watch foreigners at work and play, as well as a wide variety of English types. When he was ready for a career his father got him a job as a page at court, and from there, in a long life of business and diplomacy, Chaucer went on to form many fruitful personal connections and to observe life in its pageantry, especially as it played out into the separation among the three dominant classes of society: the nobility, the church and the commoners.

*The Canterbury Tales*, which draws on this broad experience of humanity, is a long poem considered by most critics to be Chaucer's greatest work. It consists of a General Prologue and twenty-four stories told by pilgrims making their way as a group to Canterbury.

*Question: Literature and Society*

You will be struck by Chaucer's fascination with social classes, and their typical representatives, as they gather in the Tabard Inn. Does it seem to you that Chaucer is consciously creating a portrait of his own society? If so, does that portrait spring from the narrative instinct or from the desire to portray society? In other words is Chaucer above all a story teller whose society is rich with interest for him, or is he an observer of society who has found a narrative style for characterizing that society?

*Comparative Literature:*

1. You see from the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* that Chaucer is fascinated with "character types"—the Miller, the Pardoner, the Knight, The Wife of Bath. Does he conceive of these characters as abstractions, which sum up many traits in a generalized package, or are these fully developed characters, each one distinct as Chaucer conceives him or her? The question here can take us back to Theophrastus (early 3<sup>rd</sup>cent. BCE) whose *Characters* were influential in later Western literature, and who established a kind of Linnean classification system for personality types. You will find a searching modern essay on the "rounded character" in literature, in W.K.Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, 1954).

2. Ian Watt, in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), presses the idea that the origins of the novel—which took full modern form in the 17th century—lie in the growth of the middle class, which for economic reasons began to develop in the Renaissance. Couldn't it be claimed, though, that the commercial and social bustle of Chaucer's time, and of his own life, sensitized Chaucer to precisely the new realities of "man in middle class society"? To probe the relations of literature to social developments, you might be interested in the work of a Marxist historian, Gyorgy Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* (1983).

**William Langland** (1330-1387) *Piers Plowman* (A, 268-281)

William Langland comes to us virtually without personal details. He was from the West of England, and was, as we can see from the present poem, immersed in the religious and social values of his time. He was also in sync with the aesthetic assumptions of contemporary serious poets—compliant in the long, talkative pentameter line, compliant in the framing of his most serious work in terms of dream and allegory. We have to imagine that Langland's own values are wrapped up in the allegorical clothing of his

text, for *The Vision of Piers Plowman* is not only a history of the major events of the Christian story, but a revelation of the poet's understanding of Christ's significance.

*Question: Sacred Text as Field for Freedom*

Passus 18, our reading, opens on the picture of a world-trudging pilgrim dreaming of "Christ's passion and pain" and of His people, which includes one Piers the Plowman, a slightly tweaked version of our poet himself. Through the lens of dream, Piers allows allegorical figures—Peace, Love, Mercy, Righteousness—to play through an account of the tale of Christ's sacrifice. The Question I pose to you, about this Passus, is: *in what ways do you think the poet's self-presentation, manner of vision, and view of his savior belong to a period far outdated? In what ways is Langland's work fresh and part of your own world?*

*Comparative Literature:*

1. Chapters 5 and 6, of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (Princeton, 1968) analyze two texts of mediaeval literature, and you would do well to consult this model of extended literary analysis. In many ways the Christian mediaeval imagination—allegorical, indirect, trading in symbols drawn from intense belief—is hard for us to read, harder either than ancient classical literature or even the difficult works of our own time, like James Joyce's *Finnegans Work* which requires a detailed commentary. Auerbach's book might help you appreciate the mindset of Langland. You might also like to read Charles Williams, *Descent into Hell* (1937), for a scary and profound twentieth century mediaeval type thriller, with some kinship to Langland's thought world.

2. In *Piers Plowman* Langland creates a character in search of the best way to lead the Christian life. The social perspective, under which that search is imagined as possible, is communitarian, and in a way conservative, supporting the reigning feudal structure of the time. You might think of other ambitious literary texts which attempt to construct and find value in a large social panorama of this sort. I think of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, or Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdottir*. Does literature seem to you of special value as an interpreter and forecaster of human societal possibilities?

**Julian of Norwich** (1342-1416) *Book of Showings* (A, 282-284)

How much can you know of an anchoress who cloisters herself from the world, after a ceremonial burial has ritually closed her off from the rest of society? The answer is, not much: that the cloister itself was in Norwich, in East Anglia, and is still standing, and that we know from Julian exactly the time when she received the visions that she writes of in her *Book of Showings*: May 13, 1373, at the age of thirty and a half. The rest is in the text.

*Question: The Vision of a Bleeding Head*

With William Langland we asked whether we are able to access the allegorical style today, and whether the dream vision is a captivating literary form for us. We were of course raising the issue of reading Christian literature in an age when narratives of other kinds may be more familiar or attractive to us. With Julian the problem is keener. The physical of the created world—whether Christ's bleeding head or a simple hazelnut—is infused with its spiritual meaning and presence, and yet retains a totally absorbing hereness andnowness. Question: *is this a type of imagination which you are at home with? Do you "understand" it? Can you live with this Vision?*

*Comparative Literature:*

1. We are getting into mystical territory here, not just into the visionary realm Langland took us through in *Piers Plowman*. This is the time to recommend a great book, Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* (London, 1911), which will shed light on the nature of mystical experience, as well as on the mediaeval context for the meditations of a woman like Julian of Norwich. Interestingly enough, mystical insights are inevitably tied to the cultural sensibilities of a particular historical moment.

2. Julian of Norwich writes from the center of her visions, though surely not without literary genius as shaper. You might want to look into the portrayal of religious states *in* literature, as distinct from *as* literature (Julian's case.) Good case studies can be found throughout the work of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, whose *The Brothers Karamazov* explores the religious sensibility, almost as if from the inside, but still as part of a narrator's portrayal: the characters of Alyosha, Father Zosima, and of the Grand Inquisitor are perfect examples of the portrayal of the religious sensibility from *within* literature.

Anonymous, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1375-1400) (A, 112-164)

Of the author of *Sir Gawain* we know as little as of the author of *Piers Plowman*. What conclusions we can draw are again based on linguistic evidence, and point to the area of the northwest midlands. From the tale the author creates here, in the alliterative verse which roots this English in the traditions which predate the Norman Conquest—the dividing line (1066 A.D.) separating Anglo-Saxon from Anglo-Norman England—we see that the author is deeply engrained in the Arthurian traditions which ruled much of mediaeval literature. Arthur and his Knights, in their ancestral home of Camelot, maintain the twin traditions of chivalry and knighthood, under the sign of the Cross and the Holy Virgin.

*Question: Honor and Quest in the High Middle Ages*

The question of the day is: *What is Sir Gawain really in search of? Why does he accept the original Beheading proposal, and who after all is the Green Knight?* The pentangle on Gawain's shield is a pointer toward *the truth*, the driving concept for this courteous chivalric knight, a kind of paragon of the values of his time. (Truth, as you see, means both the way things are and, in the sense of that time, *troth*, fidelity or trust—in this case to the True Religion and to King Arthur's court.) The lovely seductress tries in vain to win Gawain away from his purpose, though in the end he triumphs. *But over what? And to what avail?*

*Comparative Literature: The place of Christianity in the text before u*

1. The place of the Christian religion, in the thinking and writing of the Middle Ages, cannot be overstated. We have already encountered the Christian world in the Pardoner, the Nun's Priest, and the Parson of Chaucer; in all which tales there runs a thread of irony; in *Piers Plowman*, and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. For further understanding, of how Christianity integrates into mediaeval literature, you might want to look at the scholarly work of C.S. Lewis, himself a Christian and mediaeval scholar. (Cf. *The Discarded Image*; Cambridge, 1964).

2. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* invokes what literary scholars have often called archetypal patterns; in this case, say, the patterns of the heroic chivalric quest, that of Gawain, and of the ritual beheading and survival of the Green Knight. These patterns are typical lines of narrative, which occur in multiple texts and which seem to derive from fundamental forms of human experience. Suggestion: look into the notion of archetypal forms in literature, both as they are discussed in the psychologist Carl Jung, and in the critical classic by Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934).

**Thomas Mallory** (1405-1471) *Morte Darthur* (A, 301-318)

Though scholars still debate the life of Thomas Mallory, for whose work there are two possible claimants, it appears that the Thomas we have here is a well attested felon and jailbird, who set his literary imagination on a time and place, the mythical Arthurian period of English history, into which he could interject his disappointments and wishes. Like the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Mallory found in the roundtable world that same zone of chivalric lords and ladies which keeps Camelot alive before our thoughts even today. (Cf. for instance the legend of the Kennedy clan and their Camelot.)

*Question: Dark Passion at the Heart of Chivalry*

The question of this day is simple, and bears on the most striking passage in *Morte Darthur*. *What is Mallory's attitude toward the adultery between Lancelot and Guinevere, and toward Lancelot's behavior after that adultery?* This question begs attention because Lancelot is a generically noble figure in the

Arthurian scene, and his relation to Arthur is defining for the whole society of the roundtable. Mallory says in an aside that he is not sure what the two lovers were doing in Guinevere's chamber. Is Arthur made a fool?

And yet another question: what is your view of the funeral oration for Arthur by Sir Ector? Does Mallory rise to a high level of poetry, in this assessment of a great man?

#### *Comparative Literature:*

1. The broad background to all the works of this Unit, and directly bearing on the Arthur legends, can be checked out in a book like G. M. Trevelyan, *A Shortened History of England (Books I and II; New York, 1974)*, which conveys you briskly and thoughtfully from the end of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance.

2. You might want to browse in the Troubadour poetry being composed in Southern France at the end of the Middle Ages, especially in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. You will find that poetry populated with love/death themes, in which idealized love for the noble lady leads either to dark illegitimate passion or a sublimation of love in which the lover is cancelled out. The thematic material touched there was ripely harvested in the love/death opera of Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde (1865)*; the same material is brilliantly anatomized in Denis de Rougemont's *Love In The Western World (1972; English translation.)*

#### *Essay Questions for Unit 1*

1. Our class is on English Literature. Does *Beowulf* belong to that literature? Does the author of the poem feel he/she is working in any national tradition, or belongs to a "nation"? Does the poem embody a deep relation to cultures other than British?

2. What attitudes and literary strategies does Chaucer share with the other writers considered in this Unit? Is he deeply touched by the Christian tradition you find in Julian of Norwich or *Sir Gawain*? Would he appreciate the kinds of humor and dark passion we find in *Morte Darthur*? Or is Chaucer a Humanist for the ages, who stands out and above his time?

3. Where do you find allegorical thinking in early English literature, and what do we need to know about allegory, in order to understand the way it works in this early literature? Is it possible for us to take pleasure in allegorical literature today? Do we create and consume allegory ourselves?