

Mediaeval Literature: Resources

The following study guide aspires to stimulate, provoke discussion, and if possible generate more thorough work, by others, on a wide variety of questions whose salience has impressed itself at last on this slow to learn author. Those questions are of this sort: what is it like to live a major cultural transformation, like that which segues from the late antique world into the mediaeval—the kind of transition of which Augustine, Marcus Aurelius, Boethius or Cassiodorus are representative players?; what kind of imagination dominates mediaeval epic literatures—like *Beowulf*, *The Divine Comedy*, or the *Nibelungenlied*?; has it any relation to the imagination of the Romantics—say to Coleridge’s notion, in *Biographia Literaria*, of a power which transforms and recreates daily experience?; is there an imagination distinctive to Greco-Roman literary work?; do the genres of mediaeval literature align with those of modern or ancient literature? Is there a species of tragedy in mediaeval work? What marks mediaeval historical writing? Where do we find humor in mediaeval literature? Is it similar to the humor of the modern period?

I said the variety of questions raised here was extensive, but forgot to mention that the answers to those questions can barely be scratched by the present author. A study guide is what the following text is, little more and perhaps much less. The author is both a classicist and a writer/poet; thus has two fingers in the pie of this study guide, but has only periodically aspired, during a long life, to see what holds the ancient and modern western worlds together. This historical binding period, needed before the Greco-Roman period could bear its full fruit, and the modern world absorb that fruit, seems to translate into the Middle Ages, though it was long before the residents of that transition period even named their temporal position.

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THE RESOURCES

1 Boethius, (480-524 A.D.). *Consolation of Philosophy* (524-525 A. D.)

The historical setting

Many clichés clog the inherited picture of mediaeval culture, literature, and art. Doubtless one reason for the simplified picture we have, of the Middle Ages, is that the period is dauntingly long, incorporates many cultures and languages, and makes best sense when viewed as a bridge period, defined by the Classical and by the Modern, at its two ends. The more gangly the period, the more tempting it is to surround it with clichés.

The downfall of Rome

At its nominal entry point, the Middle Ages—which at that point, quite naturally, had no conception of itself as a middle period, nor as a period at all—was simply what was growing out from disintegrating fragments of the Roman Empire, which for a century had been dissolving into loosely formed municipal communities and tracts of what were not long before coherent agricultural stretches, with their links to settled society still intact. The barbarians, who surrounded and now began to infiltrate the Roman world, were increasingly morphing into Romance citizens, and while they would need another millennium to establish significant new cultures of their own, these proto Romance states, of the earliest modern period, were indeed finding their direction, as they left behind all but the historical traces of the ancient Roman world.

Man's earliest cultures

(Traces which were themselves, of course, tradition bearers from a far more distant past, which stretched from the Greek world back into the cultural genetics of the Mediterranean basin, and from there, deepening into our profoundest cultural bloodstream, backward into the heritages of Indian, Egyptian, and East Asian cultures. Loose and in some senses useless as the thought processes are, which batten on this kind of human archeological thinking, our dignity of inquiry requires adventuring even farther than the Neolithic in our effort to simulate a one-presence with our earliest human kin. (Back we go into a zone where fictions like Golding's *The Inheritors* or scholarly studies like James Scott's *Against the Grain*, point their ways back into the imaginative one point of origins. Vardis Fisher's *The Golden Rooms* places us squarely inside the Stone Age Cave World, lighting the first real fires of survival.)

Boethius and the post-Roman world

Be that as it may, that there is an interiorly backward motion, within the mind existence of Boethius, which thrives concurrently with his highly influential move into the Middle Ages for which we are taking him, here, as prime initiator. Born as he was in Rome, a few years after the breakdown of the Roman Empire, and its gradual replacement by elements of various non-Romanic tribes, 'barbarians,' who were 'at the gates' of the city, Boethius was soon swept up into the governing apparatus of Theodoric, the King of the Ostrogoths, who with his tribe had entered Rome from the East.

Boethius' rapid rise

(Boethius' rapid ascension into high governing positions—he was a senator, consul and *magister officiorum* by the age of thirty three—derived from Theodoric's admiration for the young man, whose valuable knowledge of Greek and Latin, no longer taken for granted even among the intelligentsia, owed much to the young Boethius' intelligence and hard work. Under the umbrella protection of Theodoric, Boethius began translating extensively from Greek, writing with equal force about the works of Aristotle, and entering the Neoplatonic zones in which he was able to synthesize the contributions to world culture of ancient Greek thought and Christian theology. He was responsible for introducing the language and philosophy of the Greeks to a mediaeval Europe, which until the beginning of the Renaissance remained only haltingly familiar with even the language of Greek.)

Boethius and the Christian world

While pursuing a vast number of projects in Greek translation and philosophical culture, Boethius was—as *magister officiorum*, master administrator of palace affairs—given particular responsibility for adjusting the interrelations between the Latin and the Eastern branches of the Christian Church, which was by this time seated in Constantinople, the present day capital of Turkey, Istanbul. It was in the course of these long-to-be-unresolved negotiations that Boethius lost the favor of Theodoric, who had him imprisoned and then put to death—most cruelly—in 524. What Boethius had already achieved, not only in his masterwork *The Consolation of Philosophy*, but in his profuse treatises on music, mathematics, logic, Aristotelian ‘topics,’ was enough to render him of unparalleled influence over the entire Mediaeval period.

The Consolation of Philosophy

The Consolation of Philosophy (524-25) grew out of the suffering of Boethius, after he had become the object of Theodoric’s hatred. Boethius had been accused of treachery, in the negotiations circling around the struggle between the Roman and the Eastern factions of Christianity. Theodoric imprisoned the suspect, and directed the (probably falsely) accused man to be jailed and ultimately executed. (The barbarous accounts of the murder, which were to involve strangling and then splitting the skull of the imprisoned genius, spoke for their time, in which the stakes of life and death were sharply jammed, and accusations from on high required little evidence.) The text before us was Boethius’ effort to deal with the harshness of his imprisonment, and the dread of a nightmarish death ahead. That this saint put his faith in writing, rather than in the recourse of his Christian belief, has led to speculations about the depth of his religious vision; and yet we have to concede that whatever works, when the going is vicious, is welcome and justified.

The noble Lady

Boethius’ search for consolation leads him to construct a dramatic dialogue between himself and Philosophy, a Lady of Minervan dignity, who represents a universal wisdom. She is guised as a pagan goddess, she speaks with the abstract knowledgeability of the Wisdom of Solomon or the Word of God in St. John’s Gospel. ‘There appeared standing over my head a woman’s form whose eyes shone as with fire, and in power of insight surpassed the eyes of men, whose color was full of light, whose strength was yet intact, though she was so full of years that none would ever think that she was subject to such age as ours. Her countenance was full of majesty.’ In his hour of need Boethius receives such a divine visit and is able thus to portray himself as the victimized, the complainer, the one who suffers from a divine injustice. It is in fact this last issue that opens and supports the entire frame of the text.

Philosophy and the Muses

As in the Book of Job, Boethius faces his suffering and dread by asking himself why a person of good intentions and honorable life should call down upon himself such a dreadful fate as his own. Philosophy appears to supply the answer. She flashes into anger as she sees that the Muses of poetry are gathering around her suppliant. We realize that she is herself proud of having survived the rough patches in life—the lower hem of her gown has been dirtied and smudged, she is a deeply experienced lady—and she will not coddle her suppliant with the fineries of poetic sophistication. She will force him—he recounts—to take his fate where he finds it, and not to pretty it up.

Boethius buckles up

With the following words she addresses Boethius, referring to the Muses: ‘Who has suffered these seducing mummings to approach this sick man?’ Philosophy concedes that, if Boethius were just some nobody—‘some uninitiated man as happens in the vulgar herd’—she herself would endure the panderings of the muses. But since her client—as Boethius puts it in reference to himself—‘has been nourished in the lore of Eleatics and Academics’—it is. Best to leave him to the professionals, which Philosophy unquestioningly accepts as her own description. In the subsequent dialogue description, Boethius ascribes to Philosophy the understanding that he, Boethius, is in fact a free student of nature as well as a

learned man. (She calls forth, from her mentee, the sense of what he is and has always been, since his birth, a man 'free to the open heavens, to watch the light of the bright sun, to penetrate the deepest secrets of the natural world.')

Philosophy reproaches Boethius

It is at this point, after having praised the inner Boethius, that Philosophy calls out her 'pupil' for being a drivelling baby, complacent and tearful. And tearful indeed Boethius becomes, as he sees the accuracy of the prophetess's analysis. At this point, seeing Boethius' tears, Philosophy grows gentle, wipes his face, and dispels the darkness by reducing him to a healthy shame, that he, privileged and highly educated, should be reduced to self-pity. He recognizes Philosophy—which is taking on the meaning of *inborn wisdom*—as his first nurse, the companion of his childhood.

Philosophy introduces Plato

Philosophy, having brought her pupil to a rest point, where he can absorb her wisdom, goes on to remind Boethius of the glory that Philosophy itself has brought upon the Greeks, and especially through the wonder of Plato's thinking.

Boethius takes stock of himself

Regaining his own courage and sense of identity, Boethius goes on to reflect on the good he has done for others, serving often as a friend to the marginalized. While he still asks questions, like 'if God is, whence come evil things?' but he is now fully prepared to reply that 'if God is not, whence come good things,' and to turn this simple formula into the proof he needs, to justify his own life.

The Platonic horizon

To this self discovery, Philosophy responds with a fitting opportunity to remind her eternal pupil that there is a Platonic oneness higher than all mortal behaviors, and to elicit from Boethius a prayer to the unity of the universe under God. (We take heed of the 'Platonic' visions that hovers over these consoling words to the suffering man, and see that the healing he needs will be part of that universal Platonic (or neoplatonic) wisdom awaiting us, at the end of the present study guide, when we come upon the works of Ficino and Pico de la Mirandola, a millenium farther into the Christian experience.

Study guide

Does Boethius feel remorse for his relations with the Emperor Theodoric? Does he feel that he has in any way been justly punished, and thrown in prison with a death sentence? Is there anything distinctly 'Christian' about the way he meets his harsh punishment in prison?

What is the special significance of music for the early Christian Church? What kind of notational system did the Church use? It was, of course, inherited from Greek notation, but what did Boethius contribute to accommodating that Greek system to the uses of the early Church?

The *Consolation of Philosophy* was one of the most widely read, copied, and consulted texts of the Middle Ages. What was the chief argument of this text, and what drew so many learned readers to it? What did they understand by 'philosophy'? Would you find understanding and solace in this text, if you were condemned to death? Would there be a religious sense to the term 'philosophy' as you would understand it?

2 Cassiodorus. (485-585) 'On the Soul,' 'On the Liberal Arts,' 'On orthography,'

The Setting

Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus

Senator (his daily life name) was a Christian scholar, diplomat, and administrator working with the same government, that of Theodoric, for which his predecessor, Boethius, had worked. (In fact it was on the death of Boethius that Cassiodorus inherited the high diplomatic position he would for most of his life occupy within the Ostrogoth Kingdom, arguably the most influential of the multiple 'barbarian tribes' which were dismantling the Roman Empire.

Family background

Cassiodorus was of a distinguished lineage, several generations back. For at least three generations the ancestors of Cassiodorus had served as stalwart protectors of both the declining Roman and the nascent Ostrogothic Kingdom as stalwart protectors. They had contributed to warding off competing 'barbarian' incursions, and subsequently to manning the new bureaucracy of the Gothic Empire.

Cassiodorus' career path

From the age of twenty Cassiodorus began to work for the Ostrogothic court, where his colleagues were rapidly impressed by his organizational skills and particularly by his writing style, which, though to our ears rather pompous and overly courtly, was of a tenor greatly valued in Theodoric's court. (One can only imagine the rare language blends generated within the formerly Roman provinces, in which Silver Latin was being mated with the Germanic structures of Gothic.) By the end of his courtly career, Cassiodorus had risen to a position equivalent to that of Prime Minister of the Ostrogothic Kingdom.

Advancing into the power structure

The ultimate ambitions of Cassiodorus were already apparent in his early career, when he collaborated with the Pope (Agapetus I) to build a library of Greek and Latin texts which were intended for use in a Christian school which Cassiodorus hoped to have founded in Rome. (It was Cassiodorus' trademark that wherever he went, in working as a Christian for the Goths, he was on the lookout for ways to fuse Christian spirituality with scholarship, with what we might today call research projects.) This papal project failed, but was to prove a significant milestone in the efforts of Cassiodorus' entire life project of devoting books and literate culture to the preservation of the classical past. The last decades of his life were to be spent in Constantinople, where he buried himself in the reading of Christian and classical texts, and greatly deepened his sense of the meanings of Christianity. This deepening involved grasping the intractable issue of Eastern versus Western Christianity, the perplexing relationships between Goths and Romans, and the relation between Orthodox worshippers and their Arian leaders.

The writings of Cassiodorus

Like his predecessor Boethius, Cassiodorus was a voluminous writer, compiler, and scholar. We have from his pen a vast library of official correspondence—written by Cassiodorus as part of his service to the Emperor Theodoric. Cassiodorus has left us a history of the Goths, which survives only in the abridgment by Jordanes, a sixth century Gothic historian, who tightened up Cassiodorus' multi-volume *History of the Goths*. There is a major text, *Training in Divine and Secular Literature*, written between 543-555, which outlines the features of the trivium and quadrivium educational system, which was to dominate educational training throughout the Middle Ages. (It was to become a capstone for the pedagogical practice of that monastery known as Vivarium, which Cassiodorus established and directed in the last years of his life. And which was developed in close physical and spiritual proximity to the monastery which Benedict of Nursia was just in the process of founding in southern Italy.) In that pedagogical work Cassiodorus was at pains to undertake at Vivarium, he worked to prepare his students for a highly trained

reading of the Bible, including both the reading of Christian historians, Flavius Josephus and the Latin fathers of the Church, and any number of Church based scholars from the early Christian period. Cassiodorus wrote a treatise on the soul, its virtues and vices—one of his few texts concerned with theology. There was also a text version of the Bible as well as a detailed commentary on the Psalms.

Other works

These latter works were written during the extensive period when Cassiodorus was living in Constantinople, and had leisure time for scholarship and reflection. So was a late work, *De Orthografia*, a compilation of the studies of eight distinguished grammarians of Latin, containing their aids to correct spelling and handwriting—which were of great importance in a world dependent on eye and hand to preserve written thought. Finally Cassiodorus busied himself in Constantinople with the writing of an oversized, and loosely structured *Historia Tripartita*, largely borrowed from the ecclesiastical histories of three contemporary historians—Theodoret, Sozomen, and Socrates—and reproduced carelessly and with many errors of spelling and fact; to which we might add that the work in question became one of the most used ‘world histories’ throughout the Middle Ages. In a pre-printing age where endless hand copying did the culture work, errors were an unceasing hazard, as were the mistakes of understanding which followed on those errors.

In addition to these brief comments on Cassiodorus’ writings, we need to mention the special attention he, like his predecessor Boethius, paid to the development of musical notation, and more broadly his contributions to the place of music in the development of the early church. He was well trained in the Greek system of musical notation, the only procedure in use, and in his applications of musical performance, to monastic work, he proved himself to be, along with Boethius (discussed above) the most influential exponent of musical art between antiquity and the later Middle Ages. Accordingly Cassiodorus figures as the most essential source available for the discussion of Church psalm and chanting in the formative period of Christianity in the West. He is also a source of information on many of the earliest instruments essential to Church rituals: shawm, bagpipe, organ, Pan pipe.

The tumult of the time

Life could not remain placid for long, in the climate of contentious ideas, which embraced Cassiodorus. The heat of the Gothic-Byzantine Wars in Italy (535) eventually obliged him to return to his family estates in Calabria, near the town of Catanzaro. (He expresses with great bitterness his sense that his diplomatic and ministerial career, on behalf of the order offered by Gothic rule, was in the end of no avail.) Retirement was simply a recognition of the turmoil of open country throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Once more in Calabria, he set up a monastery, at Vivarium, and filled it with monks and books—from his own private library—before returning for a final visit to Constantinople. By the establishment of this monastery Cassiodorus was fulfilling a lifetime dream, to sustain the tradition of classical culture right through into its ‘new’ cultural world of early Christianity. The very formation of this vision, in the crumbling conditions of sixth century Italy, had to demonstrate a beautiful counter cultural awareness of the world and of the historical passage of cultures.

Cassiodorus in history

The historical place of Cassiodorus, is locked into the breadth of vision by which he committed himself to that Vivarium monastery into which he invested so much of his live energy, not to mention his abundant personal donations to the library with which he outfitted his religious retreat.

The choice Cassiodorus had to make, in stocking his library from his own personal collection, was how to reconcile classical learning with Christian doctrine, a feat in the accomplishing of which he was obliged to convince himself and his ecclesiastical overseers that the understanding of Greek and Roman classics was the firmest path to the learning process and into the antecedents of the Christian faith. We have noted, however, that Cassiodorus’ concern with pedagogy was an independent disciplinary concern of his, and that his innovations in that regard were among his enduring contributions to the mediaeval mind. For Cassiodorus was a pedagogue as well as a Christian devotee.

Hand work and brain work

The care Cassiodorus devoted, to the pedagogical skills of his monks, extended beyond the details of orthography, and of correct Latin usage—he doubled down on the importance of Latin grammar, which was shaky with many of the monks, involving retraining in the case system of Latin, the use of punctuation, and clarity of handwriting. To students of writing—you and me—who were brought up in the era of the printing press, the immense effort of carrying through a whole cultural transformation with your hands was to recognize—it is something we easily forget—that writing is foremost a manual act, performed by those wonderfully flexible appendages in which our arms terminate. It seems a piquant footnote to this point that in the Vivarium monastery those who proved slow at learning were given tasks in the fields, where in ploughing they were enabled simply to invest another use for the above mentioned appendages.

Study guide

Do Boethius and Cassiodorus seem to you deeply influenced by the new cult of Christianity? By their time the Christian Church had grown to maturity: in the Council of Nicaea the fundamental outlines of Christian belief had been laid down, the Church was expanding throughout western Europe, and the new cities and proto cultures, which had been developing from Ireland to Constantinople, were sprouting churches and church communities. Are these symptoms of interior change? Would the individuals who were generating this change be living out lives that were accordingly different from those that characterized lives in pre Christian classical times? The work of Peter Brown, on the hinge period between classical antiquity and the early middle ages, is a rich launching point for identifying the growing traits of a new period of world history. You might add, into your consideration of our own period, your thoughts about the present historical moment. We communicate quickly and too often, these days, on quasi apocalyptic matters. Do you think we are at the end of a cultural era, or at the beginning of a new one?

3 Beowulf 600-900. (conjectural)

The mystery of *Beowulf* is wrapped up in the obscurity of the dates of its composition. Boethius and Cassiodorus, for example, were scholars, diplomats and administrators within a well recognized hierarchy—the retainers and employees of the Ostrogothic Kingdom. They were easy to locate inside history. We can date their lives and works with no problem. The author of the Old English epic *Beowulf*, which runs to 3182 alliterative lines, in West Saxon Old English, offers us a complex mixture of ancient tales, contemporary (to him) history, folklore, and imagination. Quite possibly the poem has its origins in oral traditional poetry, to which the accretions of three centuries, plus multiple actions of ‘writing it down’ have further obscured the question of authorship. The accordingly wide range of dates, for the creation of this unique poetry, seems to be an unavoidable bow to history.

General character of the epic

The central tale of the epic does little to explain itself—its historical setting, the value system it displays—and barrels forward from one powerful (and often violent) scene to the next. Parallels from other cultures are the only footsteps by which to measure the text before us. We feel sure that the Scandinavian and North German culture worlds provide a fixed cultural backsetting to *Beowulf*. The *Nibelungenlied* (for example) provides a Beowulf-like darkness of setting, with similar vast but shadowy movements, often violent, which pass across it. We find in that Germanic epic the same blend of pagan tales with Christianity, which we find in *Beowulf*. Not only, then, must we grasp at literary straws, when trying to ascribe a time and place to *Beowulf*, but we must go as far field as Homer and Virgil in our efforts to place and trying to relate this Anglo Saxon epic.

For all this dating and authorship obscurity, we know that *Beowulf* is concerned with geopolitical struggles among certain dominant Scandinavian clans throughout the sixth century, while the poem is building on references to the many connections between England and Scandinavia at the time. Archaeological

evidence from Denmark has gone far to suggest the world of vast burial sites and halls, which are both prominent features of the *Beowulf* world. Rich but misty is that world.

The tale itself

Hrothgar King of the Danes is in trouble; His great hall, Heorot, is being harassed by the monster named Grendel. (Stop for a moment! Ask yourself what kind of mindset creates an initial picture of this sort. Is the work a fancy? A monster thriller pulled out of the imagination of the author? A buried Christian discourse on evil and virtue?) The young hero, Beowulf, comes to Hrothgar's aid, slaying Grendel with his bare hands. Then he kills Grendel's mother, with a sword which he has found in her lair. In both these interventions Beowulf acts as a virtuous knight in armor, expelling dark forces.

Later in his life Beowulf becomes King of the Geats, a Scandinavian tribe, and finds that his kingdom is besieged by a dragon. Discovering that some of his treasure has been stolen from his own burial mound, he attacks the dragon and kills him, as he had killed Grendel and his mother, but is himself mortally wounded. He is cremated, and a burial mound is erected in his honor. He joins the army of heroic kings.

Grendel's mother

Funerals bookend the epic, the first the funeral of the Scyld, the second the funeral of Beowulf himself. The fighting between Beowulf and Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon who appears destructively later (fifty years later) in the epic, is fierce and bloody. Beowulf tears Grendel's arm off, brutally wounding him and sending him in flight into the mountains, where he dies. Beowulf puts on display 'the whole of Grendel's shoulder and arm, his awesome grasp.'

Grendel's mother is aroused to fury, by this desecration of her son, and while Beowulf himself is absent, in another lodging, she attacks Hrothgar's hall, where the murder of Grendel had originally taken place. She violently kills the most loyal retainer of Hrothgar, then races back to her lacustrine cave. (The uncanny décor of the poem is not explained or justified—it is just the lived world of the poem. Beowulf and Hrothgar pursue her—no stopping, no pausing, no 'taking time to reflect'—as Beowulf plunges into the depths of the Grendel lake, fending off assaults from sea monsters as he goes. (The 'depth psychology' of this pursuit is nightmarish, ravaging the purposeful, reestablishing this primal epic at the core of the epic imagination.) Finally arriving at Grendel's mother's lair, Beowulf spots a sword on the wall, correctly assumes that it is of monster-slaying potency, and dispatches the monster mother's head. As he departs from the scene of carnage, Beowulf comes on the corpse of Grendel, which he decapitates, returning to the surface and to a grateful Hrothgar, who welcomes back the hero. Accepting the fruits of Beowulf's courage, Hrothgar treats the hero to a didactic speech, in which he reminds him not to give way to pride, or to forget those who have helped him along his way. We wonder in vain whether there is a touch of humor in the odd placement of this moral harangue.

Fifty years later

A slave steals a precious cup from the lair of a dragon, and when the creature realizes what has happened, he surges out of his lair, destroying everything he can find. He lives on the same vitriol as had Grendel's mother. Beowulf goes out to meet him, and to protect the land, but in mortal combat is slain by the dragon. Beowulf is cremated. His ashes are deposited in a royal tomb, visible from the sea. He is a potent landmark for seafaring mortals.

And scattered throughout

The artistry of the poem thrives on the handling of time. The 'fifty years later' words, with which we switch to the dragon narrative, jolt our understanding of Beowulf's durability, and freshen our astonishment at both his power and his availability. That is not the only way in which temporal layering thickens the poem. Beowulf's feats are highlighted—as in his swimming across the sea from Frisia, carrying thirty suits of armor—as are interspersed lays and tales of the Geatish people, or the discussions between Beowulf and

the monster Unferth about the latter's sword, and its propriety as a weapon against Grendel's mother. All of these aspects enrich the sense of time in which the poem transpires. Within the background of enrichment tread the exploits of Beowulf himself, hardly sketched as a personality, and yet, in his intent murkiness, furiously faithful to task, fearless before the worst of struggles.

The survival of the poem of Beowulf and its path into the Middle Ages

Obscurity and questions envelop the epic of *Beowulf*. Was the poem originally oral, and then preserved by transformation into writing? If so, at what time did that take place? Or was the epic basically a written text, put to pen and paper at some point in a recent oral career? Was the work orally maintained at an early mediaeval period, like the year 600, which would mean the genesis of the work overlaps with the period of Boethius and Cassiodorus, scholars of the written word, even of the subtleties of translation, and thoughtful interpreters of the Christian textual tradition? Precision on that set of dating queries is still beyond us.

The aura of the complexity of the Middle Ages

What we can pin down, as we analyze this epic, is the beginning of our grasp of the complexity of the Middle Ages. Compared to those ages—a millennium between Augustine and Pico della Mirandola (for instance), the classical period, perhaps even the 'modern' period, display kinds of coherence unknown in the Middle Ages. Ancient Greek culture of the fifth century B.C., for instance, was culturally coherent, comprising the gradual coalescing of Hellenic ethnic groups (Ionians, Dorians, Aetolians) into a single cultural tone. A single set of values was gradually appearing, even among communal groups as antagonistic as the Athenians and their rival cultural communities—like the Melians. Even in its vastness, Rome was a relatively coherent concept, for a millennium embracing most of western Europe with a single language, and a governmental structure which carried with it appendices of cultural values unbroken until the crumbling of the Empire in the fifth century.

With the piecemeal disintegration of the Roman Empire begins a millennium in which western Europe fragments into the prenational units which grew from the amalgam of Empire itself, and its many tributary tribe-states. An enormous but still incoherent gathering of tribes and cultures yeasted out around the Capital of Christendom, Constantinople, as well as around the larger groups composing what would gradually become the nations of Western Europe. Within those groups, however, diversity was the name of the game. From the darker Scandinavian epics, to the courtly poetries of the proto-Romance region, to the ecclesiastical and historical writings of the Anglo Saxons and Irish, there was immense variation of tone and purpose. It is hardly to be wondered, then, that by opening with two learned bureaucrat scholar-writers and following them with a mysterious epic, which may well date from the same time, we are readying ourselves for a network of historical surprises which will not easily settle into an undisturbed picture.

Study guides.

What is the meaning of the monsters swimming snakes and dragon that populate this epic? Are they forces of evil, 'symbols' of the dark side of the created world? Does Beowulf represent their inverse, the purity of the world in action? Or is that to attribute too much philosophical importance to Beowulf? Would we be wiser to compare him with a Homeric hero like Odysseus, who though a trickster is nonetheless intent on solving the problems of evil (the suitors), getting back home, and collaborating with his son to drive out the forces of evil (the suitors).

Has Beowulf elements of a miracle man about him?

Does the epic of Beowulf spring from a literary imagination? Would that be the imagination of Germanic epic poetry, roughly contemporaneous with Beowulf? Does the hero transform the world by the way he passes through it? Do we, in fact, feel that there is an author for this epic? Has the poem the trademarks of a personal set of attitudes, or is this work more nearly a tale? Is there a moral in this tale?

4 The Dream of the Rood 700-775 (conjectural)

Dating and authorship

Dating difficulties surround most of the major works of Mediaeval literature. Records were often lost, damaged, or misinterpreted, and above that there was the difficulty of determining where and by whom major writings were created. In the present instance, there are only limited landmarks to guide us to the authorship or date of the poem called *The Dream of the Rood*. We know that the text is preserved in the Vercelli Book, a 10th century archival compilation, existing in Italy, and from other evidence we surmise that the text may date from the eighth century. An instance may indicate how fortuitous is the 'other evidence' concerning the possible eighth century dating of the poem. The Ruthwell Cross, an eighteen foot tall obelisk-cross, decorated with foliage and runes, tells a collage of stories from the Bible, and preserves parts of *The Dream of the Rood*.

The poem

The Dream of the Rood (pole; cross) is a dense religious poem, 156 lines of alliterative verse, in which the narrator recounts a dream that came to him in the middle of the night:

*Listen! I will speak of the sweetest dream,
What came to me in the middle of the niught,
When speech-hearers slept in their rest.
It seemed to me that I saw a most wondrous tree,
Raised on high, round wound with light,
The brightest of beams.*

Translation throughout by Roy Liuzza)

From this point on we are in the hands of a hyper sensitive observer, who at once observes the tree glistening with jewels, as brilliant to behold as the creation itself, and sees that this gallows is for no felon, but is circled round with the blessings of the holy angels. From the outset of this dream, we are fixated on a wooden cross of great splendor and meaning, and though the drift of the language is fully Christian, the implications of the articulate and glistening tree are as pagan-archaic as a maypole.

From this initial vision point the narrator reflects on his own sinfulness, and the contrast it makes with the brilliance of the tree. It is at this point that the complexity of the poem kicks in:

Beneath that gold I began to see an ancient wretched struggle, when it first began to bleed on the right side.

Is the wood itself the creator?

I saw that eager beacon change garments and colors,

Risks the poet, ascribing to the tree two traits, soaked with blood and 'bedecked with treasure.'

The introductory feast of attention is complete. We would have no trouble thinking of the poem ahead of us as pagan and Christian interwoven. To a degree this conclusion would fit the read of *Beowulf*, in himself a king of secular salvations, a slayer of evil forces, and a sacrificial victim, while at the same time a bare knuckled warrior from Geatland.

At this point the wood of the tree begins to speak, transformed now into a historicizing tree reflecting on its original felling, at the forest's edge, and recognizing again God's plan to make it, me the tree, the carrier of the exhausted bleeding body who mounted me. I dared not, the tree continues, dare to bend down or slacken my straightness; I knew what I has responsible for carrying. One with the man he is

carrying, and bloody with the blood of that man, he endured, mocked, with his bloody burden. He continues to address us, ruminating on the events of the tomb, and eventually the adulation of the tree, himself, For all his scars and blood, the tree, partly the man who died there, part beneficence itself, sees itself as a salvation conferring force. Surrounded by the Savior and the tree he died upon, mankind has nothing more to fear. The narrator exits triumphantly from his adventure into salvation by way of the material wood, which first entered into conversation with the daring mortal.

The pagan- Christian imagination

We have briefly pinpointed four individual authors from the early Middle Ages.

Boethius and Cassiodorus carried with them classical learning, the experience of a Christian culture, a Roman Imperial perspective—in what concerned the split between Romanitas and the new world which did not yet know how to name itself.

The figure of Philosophia, in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, is a prototypical mercy figure, skirting the emotional richness of what, in the Mother of Christ, become a defining figure for the growing emotional richness of early Christianity. while Cassiodorus immersed himself, for one thing, in the liturgical music destined to play so large a role in the early development of Church music.

The authors of *Beowulf* and *The Dream of the Rood* arguably created a couple of centuries after the two Ostrogothic diplomats and scholars. In both of these workers in the imagination, Christian themes were sharply developed. (The emergence of those themes was evident, here and there, throughout ancient classical culture—in the spiritual loyalty of Antigone, in the instinctive understanding between Orestes and Iphigeneia, even in the wounded love of Dido for Aeneas, and in the complex-compassionate world-view of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. By and large, though, the Greco Roman world outlook was short on compassion, if long on human understanding.)

When we come to *Beowulf* and the poem of the *Dream of the Rood*, we immediately intuit an altered climate. There are, in *Beowulf*, many references to Biblical material—for example the flood, and Cain—to whom Grendel is plausibly likened—and there is the image of Beowulf himself, as a noble, perhaps salvific figure, keen to clean out vicious figures like Grendel, his mother, and the dragon. There is no motivation for Beowulf's action, outside the pure desire to clear away evil. *The Dream of the Rood* carries this theme of pure ego lessness to the doorstep of Christianity—in fact to the limits of any highly organized religious insight, into the articulate of the spiritual speaking through nature into the human orbit.

Study guides

Does the present poem surprise you by its 'modernity?' That is, does the imaginative work that moves the poem into a speaking tree, and from there into the tree's burden and joys seem to you bold beyond expectations, stylistically and sensually? Does 'modern poetry' not thrive on the same kind of daring we see in this poem, where the dislocated subject moves penetratingly over a fretful and ambiguity rich field of meaning?

Is the Rood itself a part of nature or an other ego to the speaker of the poem? Does the speaker of the poem become the Rood? In other words, who is the subject and who the object of this poem? Does the fact that the poem is a 'dream' authorize a kaleidoscopic landscape, in which all the participants are articulate, and even the narrator is part of what he narrates?

This poem is 'Christian' in the way it involves the religion's savior, his sufferings, and the meaning of his suffering? Is it also a hymn to nature, and to the power of nature to express the deepest human experiences? Is the narrator a 'pantheist' as well as a monotheistic believer?

5 Caedmon's Hymn. 658-680

What we know of Caedmon comes to us from the Venerable Bede. (d. 731), who tells us—in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*-- that Caedmon was an illiterate and unmusical cowherd, who was miraculously given the power to create (sing) the brief hymn in question, the only work attributed to him. Whatever the case, it seems plausible that the present hymn is the earliest preserved poem in Old English. It is widely thought to represent a continuation of Germanic praise poetry. This old English poem is attested in the second largest number of manuscripts of old English's poetry—all of them manuscripts of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English people*. The poem is a treasured and unique piece of English literature.

A translation

*Guardian of heaven. whom we come to praise
Who mapped Creation. In his thought's sinews
Glory-father. who worked out each wonder
Began with broad earth. A gift for his children
First roofed it with heaven. The holy Shaper
Established it forever as in the beginning
Called it middle kingdom. Fenced it with angels
Created a habitation. For man to praise his splendor*

Translation by Harvey Shapiro

The creator is an intellectual, who mapped his creation. (More frequently described as a moulder, artificer, this creator works from a model in his mind. He protects his creation with his mind, fencing it in, making it a habitation for praise of his splendor.). He is also a father, concerned for his children, and a worker-through, who creates with the sinews of his mind.

What kind of cultural transformation is at work here?

We have looked at Beowulf, and at *The Dream of the Rood*. We opened with a look at the Christian Ostrogoths, Cassiodorus and Boethius. Are we finding, in these writers, testimony to a previously un familiar view of the world and its maker? Would we find a parallel to this 'early Christian thinking' in, say, Ancient Greek or Roman literature? Or the literature of the Ancient Near East? In, say, the Egyptian Hymn to Akhnaton or even in the Vedas? These are broad and even vague questions. Yet they may provoke us to see what 'feels new' about early Christian culture in Western Europe.

Already in the fourth century, Saint Augustine has boldly introduced the Christian perspective into pagan culture. That is, two centuries before Constantine, and the transfer of the Roman Empire to the East, Christianity had begun to develop a marked public voice. It had suffered martyrdom, had assumed various religious colorings—in Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople—and had outlived the sporadic recurrences of paganism in the Roman Empire—notably the reign of Julian the Apostate (355-360). The declaration of monotheistic belief, in Caedmon's hymn, falls into place as an already formulated and culturally intelligible text. By the time of this hymn, we have to assume, the Christian world-formulation of the Carolingian World will have to have acquired the familiarity status of a widespread belief.

Masterpaper

Caedmon's Hymn, despite its attribution to an unlettered shepherd, emerges as a confident and quite clearly formulated credo. We take the beliefs of the hymn to be drawn from the society—we are in any case far from the Council of Nicaea, at which the early Church had laid down its basic beliefs. Romanesque church building, in its earliest phase, dotted the landscape, young men found their ways into the clergy, the fields were given holy blessing at harvest time. We are well into the formation of a new culture, by the time a work like Caedmon's Hymn can be formulated. Is there a specific time measurement, for a new culture to ripen into a mature and multi-sided statement? Do you feel that you are

in a culture that has begun fully to express itself? Or that is still reaching for the means to give full and mature expression to itself? If this question seems vague, could you pin it down by asking yourself when and where your culture began, and in fact what the name of your culture should properly be?

6 Venerable Bede (672-735)

Ecclesiastical History of the English People 731

Bede ('the father of English history') was an English monk long residing in the monastery of Sts. Peter and Paul, in the Kingdom of Northumbria, in northern England. Although he travelled frequently to fellow monasteries around England, he remained largely monastery based, throughout his life, and did not travel abroad. He was a scholar before all, and a writer, especially a historian, at the same time. (He was also a lyric poet, a theologian, and an expert on calendar dating, a skill for which he created a computer in his fashion—a computational device for date calculation—and with which he made several conceptual innovations, including the method of historical dating in terms of the birthdate of Christ—the *Anno domini*, year of our Lord, method.)

Of Bede's origins we know little, except that from youth on he appears frequently in the company of the wealthy and influential, and that his own experience as a writer and teacher seems to have kept him in contact with worldly and intellectual circles. (We may see something of a self-portrait in the passage cited below, concerning the life of Pope Gregory.) The simplicity of his life precluded much time spent in society, and guaranteed that prayer and ritual observance dominated much of his daily existence. That he was an engaged writer, throughout his life, will support the presumption that a monastic cell and an attached monastic library were his chief lifetime ports of call. His contributions to the contemporary Carolingian Renaissance (7th and 8th centuries, court of Charlemagne) were driven largely by the pen and guaranteed him an important role in the very history he was noted for writing about—as it turned out, in many of his over sixty books.

The writings of Bede

Bede's first writings--*De Arte Metrica* and *De Schematibus et Tropis*- were intended for classroom use. *De Temporibus* (*On time*; on the calculation of time) followed. Bede's age was one in which considerable Christian thought was devoted to calculating the age of the universe, and the place of Christ in that spectrum. (His conclusion was that Christ had been born 3952 years after the creation of the world.) Bede's *De Orthografia* was intended as a learning tool for students facing difficulties in reading and learning classical Latin.

Bede was a tireless commentator on the Gospels, and other works of Biblical learning; his numerous homilies were preserved along with his historical work.

In among his many texts concerned with the calculation of time, Bede ventured often into astronomy, and into the effect of the movements and shapes of the stars and planets on the ways we choose to measure time. A lasting search for a precise date for Easter was the driver for his blend of astronomical computation—the work he created with his own computus studies.

The Mind of Bede

Like his predecessors Cassiodorus and Isidore of Seville, Bede had an encyclopedic mind, which extended to all aspects of natural history and universal knowledge.

Thomas Carlyle observed that Bede was the greatest historian since Herodotus. It is worth looking a little closely at certain assumptions and projects of his most renowned work, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Here is the beginning of the text:

CHAP. I. *Of the Situation of Britain and Ireland, and of their ancient inhabitants*

Britain, an island in the Atlantic, formerly called Albion, lies to the north-west, facing, though at a considerable distance, the coasts of Germany, France, and Spain, which form the greatest part of Europe. It extends 800 miles in length towards the north, and is 200 miles in breadth, except where several promontories extend further in breadth, by which its compass is made to be 4,875 miles. To the south lies Belgic Gaul. To its nearest shore there is an easy passage from the city of Rutubi Portus, by the English now corrupted into Reptacaestir. The distance from here across the sea to Gessoriacum, the nearest shore in the territory of the Morini, is fifty miles, or as some writers say, 450 furlongs. On the other side of the island, where it opens upon the boundless ocean, it has the islands called Orcades. Britain is rich in grain and trees, and is well adapted for feeding cattle and beasts of burden. It also produces vines in some places, and has plenty of land and water fowl of divers sorts; it is remarkable also for rivers abounding in fish, and plentiful springs. It has the greatest plenty of salmon and eels; seals are also frequently taken, and dolphins, as also whales; besides many sorts of shell-fish, such as mussels, in which are often found excellent pearls of all colours, red, purple, violet and green, but chiefly white. There is also a great abundance of snails, of which the scarlet dye is made, a most beautiful red, which never fades with the heat of the sun or exposure to rain, but the older it is, the more beautiful it becomes. It has both salt and hot springs, and from them flow rivers which furnish hot baths proper for all ages and both sexes

Two features of the beginning of this text: *Extrapolation; proprioception.*

Bede begins by extrapolating from his sense of place to accounting for a whole landscape, quantifying dimensions as he proceeds. This kind of body sense transfer—note the clarity with which he defines his own position in terms of the distances from him, an unspecified but prominent location—implies a distinctive capacity to locate himself, and has to do with the additive mindset of Bede, an encyclopedic mind—like that of Cassiodorus and Isidore, two nearly contemporary colleagues in the organizational project of a new culture, the mediaeval Christian, which will itself represent a locational nomenclature, the naming of self as ‘in the middle,’ later to become our ‘Middle Ages.’ Can we call this skill, of Bede, a natural proprioception, an orientation from within the tissues of the body? Bede’s internal gyroscope is accurate.

Extravagance; richness

Geometrical extrapolation is one of Bede’s sentience-patterns, while extravagance, a sense of outflowing abundance and richness, is another. Consider the unfolding painterly abundance of the landscape of Britain, which is after all the target of Bede’s entire account. Fish, shellfish, beasts of burden, beasts of burden, pearls and their dye: God’s richness seems to pour forth from the verbal source, the same center that self-geometrized the distinctive layout of the British Isles. Extrapolation and extravagance lie ready to hand in Bede’s repertoire.

How does he handle narration, the text flow on which his spatial and uberant sensibilities batten? Take a look at his characterization of Pope Gregory, who died in 694.

He was by nation a Roman, son of Gordianus, tracing his descent from ancestors that were not only noble, but religious. Moreover Felix, once bishop of the same Apostolic see, a man of great honour in Christ and in the Church, was his forefather. Nor did he show his nobility in religion by less strength of devotion than his parents and kindred. But that nobility of this world which was seen in him, by the help of the Divine Grace, he used only to gain the glory of eternal dignity; for soon quitting his secular habit, he entered a monastery, wherein he began to live with so much grace of perfection that (as he was wont afterwards with tears to testify) his mind was above all transitory things; that he rose superior to all that is subject to change; that he used to think of nothing but what was heavenly; that, whilst detained by the body, he broke through the bonds of the flesh by contemplation; and that he even loved death, which is a penalty to almost all men, as the entrance into life, and the reward of his labours. This he used to say of

himself, not to boast of his progress in virtue, but rather to bewail the falling off which he imagined he had sustained through his pastoral charge. Indeed, once in a private conversation with his deacon, Peter, after having enumerated the former virtues of his soul, he added sorrowfully, "But now, on account of the pastoral charge, it is entangled with the affairs of laymen, and, after so fair an appearance of inward peace, is defiled with the dust of earthly action. And having wasted itself on outward things, by turning aside to the affairs of many men, even when it desires the inward things, it returns to them undoubtedly impaired. I therefore consider what I endure, I consider what I have lost, and when I behold what I have thrown away, that which I bear appears the more grievous."

In this passage of 335 words Bede presents a rounded life portrait of a man he considered saintly. With a faultless smoothness of style he lays out the essential steps of Gregory's life: scion of noble and religious background; admiration that has plagued him since he got mired in the details of parishioners' lives; Gregory's lasting regret at what he has lost by involvement with the world.

This kind of limpid narration made Carlyle think of Herodotus, and rightly; like Bede, Herodotus holds a global conception of the object of his narration. He gives no evidence of punctuating his prose style, which flows in a single sheet.

Bede as a person

Bede the man leaves behind him the sense of staunch dignity, the mode he attributes to Pope Gregory. A man of honor, prayer, and endless activity, busy in the pulpit, in the writing of biblical commentaries, and in the congealing of his personal experience, inside a magisterial account of the history of his people.

Study guides

Bede, like Cassiodorus—and other encyclopedic thinkers of the early Middle Ages, like Isidore of Seville or Cassiodorus—were compilers, of histories, ecclesiastical traditions, or of 'information about the world.' Had they the sense, then, of being in a new world? Did they feel continuity with the spirit of classical, especially Roman, antiquity? Or did the men we track here feel part of a new kind of civilization, dating from the birth of Christ? Bede was, for his time, an expert in calculating time and dates. Do you suppose he had a mental chronology, of the time separating himself from the date of the Fall of Rome? (He was born some two hundred years after the Fall of Rome.) Do you yourself have a temporal world, in your mind, in side which you can place the life you have lived?

Where do you suppose Bede got his information sources for his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*? We have to convert our minds to a period eight centuries later, when there was a printing press. To create a book—acquire good paper stock, handwrite the text, bind the whole (usually in leather)—was a far cry from the printing industry of that Gutenberg day—which has itself, by this time, been superseded by many technical changes. In Bede's own day, we can start by noting, the chief textual resource was the monastery library at Wearmouth-Jarrow—the site of Bede's own adult life. The monastery was a center of learning, and had two hundred books in its library.

The books at hand for Bede, in his monastery library, included a number of histories—by Rufinus, Gregory of Tours, Constantius, Gildas—as well as editions of the major authors of Roman literature. Bede was lucky enough to have clerical colleagues throughout the British Isles, who could fill in his knowledge of this or that region or religious institution. It will be evident, from these hints at the reading resources of Bede, that he was completely at home in Latin.

Was it feasible to carry out historical research in Bede's time? What would you say about Bede's historical text, from the limited examples given here? Has he a 'Christian' view of his own place in history? How does his religious allegiance play out into his text? What kind of conception of Europe has he?

7 Song of Roland (*Chanson de Roland*) 1040-1115)

The French Epic

The *Chanson de Roland* was one of many heroic songs, some of epic dimension, which circulated throughout France in the Middle Ages, and which were very popular from the 12th to the 14th centuries. (We need to note that France was during this period not yet quite *France*, but was a loosely bundled together collection of duchies and kingdoms, in which royal courts hosted entertainment both for the nobility and for the man and woman serving as serfs on the manor. It was in such settings as these that the *jongleur* song tradition thrived.) The songs they sang were recited to music by a group of *minstrels*, who were no doubt familiar with the basic outlines of the material they performed, but at the same time improvised—something we see in the various versions of Homer which sprouted around ‘his’ work, the Homeric Hymns-- as their genius permitted.

Formalizing the French poetic material

The writing down of this traditional heroic material is hard to date, like that which played into *Beowulf* or the *Nibelungenlied*, and seems to have flooded quietly into the common and growing mass of poetic material accumulating in the culture. We are in any case certain that composers came along, in the course of time, who brought regional tales to a certain fullness; clerics were primarily responsible for the written texts. The culture of text-copying was highly developed in the Middle Ages, as in the earliest stages of human writing, certainly in Homer and the Upanisads. The conventionally accepted ‘authentic composer’ of the present work, Turoludus by name, was the one who wrote out the text of the epic, containing some 4,004 lines, in the form we now call the *Oxford manuscript*. The date of Turoludus’ constructive composition was between 1040--1115.

The epic and its hero

The hero of the *Chanson de Roland* is a noble knight fighting in the army of Charlemagne. (Note: the fighting involved, and described in the poem, dates from three hundred years prior to the writing down by Turoludus. In other words, this is an historical epic) The plot of the tale is complex as is the significance of it, and we have to marvel at the internal brilliance of this oral popular tradition.

The Plot

The plot goes like this. The army of Charlemagne is engaged in combat with the Saracens in Spain; the armed conflict between Christians and Muslims is raging on many fronts of the Iberian peninsula, where the Muslims have come close to a major invasion of Europe as a whole. (The basis of French national pride, in this so called ‘national French epic,’ is grounded in the massive cultural conflict between traditional European Christian values and those of the Muslim Middle East.) The Muslims have been fighting in Spain for seven years, and the only city—around which the present conflict rages—remaining to them is Saragossa. Charlemagne decides to propose a truce to the Saracens, and thereupon the French army, under the command of Roland, decides to send a deputation to Spain to negotiate a settlement with Marsile, the Muslim leader of the besieged army. It is time for peace.

Ganelon

Roland chooses his uncle, Ganelon, to carry out the sensitive mission to Marsile. Ganelon accepts the assignment, but with deep resentment, because he knows the fatal dangers of the mission, and in the end, fearing that he is walking into a trap, suspects Roland of wanting to get rid of him. So deep is Ganelon’s resentment, finally, that instead of negotiating a peace settlement he plots with the Saracens to ambush Roland and his men as they withdraw from Spain. (The intricacies of this intrigue within intrigue remind us perhaps of the complexity level of infighting and bad conscience in Homer.)

The Ambush and the fatal decision

The treacherous ambush takes place, Roland finds himself and his men cut off, and then Roland makes a gesture which characterizes him and brings the moral energy of the epic to the fore. It involves the magical horn of the Franks--the *oliphant*, derived from the word *elephant*, the ivory and tusk bearer who has deposited his magic force in its trunk. In his pride and honor Roland refuses to blow into the trumpet, to call on Charlemagne's help, which he could have done by blowing his own famed hunting horn—which acquires almost a magical power. As it turns out the chief action of the poem is a non-action, the refusal of Roland to sacrifice his pride, when it could have saved the French. Only when it is too late does Roland, expiring, blast out his lungs into the trumpet, but the gasped fury is so strong that the hero dies in the effort, and is in that moment taken up into heaven. In the aftermath, still within the epic, Charlemagne fights the battle of Roncesvalles, finally making the Saracens his servants. Ganelon is brutally punished for his treachery. Horses tear him limb from limb. Roland is guilty of having refused to call for help.

The Christian Tenor

The contemporary reader must work to assess the Christian tenor of this epic. Roland is called *proulx*, brave, but one must read into this trait his entire knightly dignity. He is brave in the sense of loyal to the good, finally unshakable. (The world of Charlemagne, which was deeply touched by early mediaeval Christianity, added to Roland's sense of individual worth the chivalric component, blending virtue with *virtu* in a unique formula.) At the same time we are reading a poem composed at the time of *the Crusades*—though the First Crusade occurred in a period three hundred years in the past, when the image of the faithful knight hero—material of the Arthurian saga, for instance--was predominant.) Roland's ascension into heaven—following on his temple blasting horn blow on the magical trumpet Olifant-- is a credible event horizon, given a pervasive world view that includes the ever present possibility either of salvation or damnation.

Roland as Hero

What kind of hero is Roland? The answer is not simple. Does Roland use poor judgment in sending Ganelon to negotiate in Spain? Or is he plotting against Ganelon? Is Roland's refusal to call for assistance, after the ambush of his forces, heroic or foolish? Is his pride misplaced or essential to his nature? What do you make of his instantaneous ascension into heaven? Does that event indicate God's total approval of Roland's behavior?

The *Chanson de Roland* was apparently composed, as a full scale epic, some three centuries after the events that form its material. From what perspective does the epic seem to be written, that of the participants in the 'original events,' or that of the world of the composer, Tuoldus? Do many epics reflect a significant time gap between the composer's perspective and that of the participants in the original events of the epic?

The Making of the epic line

The Song of Roland, now the national French epic, came to birth through a long and winding history. The poem set itself in the Carolingian era, but was developed and finally written down three hundred years later. It eventually existed in many manuscripts—was copied and passed around many times—until eventually it became a widespread favorite text of the European Renaissance.

From the earliest manuscripts on, in the eleventh century, it has been suspected that the first texts of the epic may have exercised an influence in the First Crusade, 1096-1099, and the passage of centuries may have seen many more investments of the poem in actual events. We need to think this evolution of the epic into the work of a succession of creative *jongleurs*, performing their art at different stages of their own crafts. It was out of this matrix of evolutions that the long, rangy line of the epic grew. These lines, the sinews of the epic, were decasyllabic, of ten syllables each, and divided in the middle by a strong

cesura, breaking them for intensity into a statemental and a responsive portion. Thus the *laisse* line is assonal, rhymes or echoes within itself, and is not a rhyming partner—the western epic, from Homer on, giving ample room for internal tone and self play.

On the level of narrative, as of line construction, the present epic proceeds through pairing, which keeps the poem turned in on itself: Roland proposes Ganelon to carry out the dangerous mission to the Muslim camp, while Ganelon arranges for Roland to ride in the rear guard of the French battle line, where he will be a sitting duck for ambush. Accordingly, the narrative whole turns largely around action, while explicit introspection is minimized, and must be extracted from behavior, as we read Roland's painful reluctance to blow the horn of Oliphant, calling for help from Charlemagne.

Study guide

The Song of Roland has come to be considered the national epic of France. Does France enter the poem as a national concept or is it a question of competing French courts, and regional lords, which moves the epic? If so, would you say that Do we see France in the making, in this poem? Tey out various responses to these questions, and consider whether the epic plays a special role in the formation of a nation? What other epics, than *The Song of Roland*, seem to you formative for the nation in which they are written? How about the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*? Does *the Iliad* contribute to the discussion of a national consciousness in Greece? (Do we see the Greek warriors—Diomedes, Nester, Patroklos-- working to support a whole, a single social political unit, or are they conspicuously part of individual histories, which touch universal values in, say, the case of Priam's struggle with pride in his final mission to Achilles? *Suggestion, write a significant three or four thousand word essay on the relation between the epic and the formation of a nation.*

Although the *Song of Roland* is an epic in which important decisions are all important, for instance as in Roland's initial decision not to call for help, there is no verbal introspection accompanying the decision. Have you seen occasions of narrative introspection in 'older literatures'? Do you think that in ancient Greek drama a writer like Euripides—say in the *Orestes*—develops a picture of inward thinking and inner feelings? What is it that makes a figure like Hamlet such a natural example of introspection? Is it that the entire plot that encases him, is on a quest to determine who Hamlet's step dad really is?

8 Geoffrey of Monmouth. 1095-1155

History of the Kings of England (1135-1139)

Setting

Much of our prior discussion has concerned the transition from one culture to a succeeding culture. With Cassiodorus and Boethius we met the mediaeval mind at an early stage of reformulating the world of Ancient Rome. Of course this revolutionary cultural project had been heralded well before, by the intervention of Christianity into the more or less continuous flow of historical succession which had received it.

Christianity as Intervention

The patient believers in the catacombs began the subversion of Empire, the profundity of Saint Augustine heralded in the early Christian Church Fathers, the syncretic theologizing of Philo Judaeus and the Alexandrian world, and at the Fall of the Great Pagan Empire such still deeply Latinate Christian scholars as Boethius and Cassiodorus settled in to assess the distance they had taken from the central tenets of antiquity.

Historical transition

The period of Classical-Christian transition, which was rich in contradictory hues, would be centuries in formulating itself, and indeed the millennium of what we call the Middle Ages would hardly suffice, for the formulation in question, so that to our very day, when we have a somewhat coherent sense of 'modernity,' and even of 'Greco Roman' society, we fumble over the meaning of the Middle Ages, daunted by the complexity of organizing an inner map of so many evolving national cultures over so vast a time span.

The Middle Ages formulate their own history

By the 'middle of the Middle Ages,' so to speak, we encounter, in the Venerable Bede, a balanced effort to take stock of where British history stood at his time—672-735—and to locate his own moment—two centuries into the Middle Ages—in relation to antiquity. Four hundred years later, Geoffrey of Monmouth, in one of the most read books of the Middle Ages, made the same effort as Bede, to take a purview of the historical world he was in, but taking a launching stance from the imagination, instead of from what in Bede's case we called a 'proprioceptive' conspectus of the world lying 'behind him.' Geoffrey shared, with Bede, a desire to construct a coherent backdrop for the culture he inherited.

Historia Regum Britanniae (History of the Kings of Britain) (1135-1139)

Monmouth's major text, the *Historia*, provides great ballast for the irrepressible legend of King Arthur, and belongs to the present discussion, of the British Middle Ages, for his popular history of the kings of England. In writing his history this Catholic priest of Breton descent, who spent his career life in the diocese of Oxford, joined a host of earlier British annalists or chroniclers in looking for a bridge between their own culture and that of the Romans whose cultural descendants they were.—or believed they were.

Geoffrey, Fabulist or Historian?

Geoffrey is largely viewed as a fabulist, living in his imagination, and was in his time—and throughout the Middle Ages—popular, imbibing and transforming the widespread European fascination with King Arthur, whom we now know to be pure fabrication. The mission of Geoffrey's history was well based, to ground the continuity of British history with the greatness of its Roman origins. All that was required was to solder bridge passages between early British and late Roman histories.

The Roman origins of the British people

The starting point, for Geoffrey's nationalist history, is the settling of Britain by Brutus the Trojan, the great-grandson of Aeneas (from Virgil's *Aeneid*), and by Corineus, the eponymous founder of Cornwall in Britain. (For Geoffrey, both of these ancestral predecessors of the British had won renown for their killing off of the giants of Britain.) The link having been established, between Romans and residents of the British Isles, it became intricately possible to join the histories of the two peoples, Romans and British, and to make way for the introduction of fictional culture heroes, like Arthur, who would prove to be a savior for the British people, and would serve as the culminating figure of this entire tale.

(The culminating but not the sole history making figure of the tale. The ancient Briton tale of Lochrine and Sabrina (the river Severn); the tale of King Leir (Lear) and the dismemberment of his kingdom, and its division among three daughters; a sequence of fictions about the British struggles against the Saxons: these chapters were published separately, before 1136, and established a grounding sketch of a mythography of the British Isles: Geoffrey having at this point clearly erased the borders between empirical history—what we have from Bede, on the whole,—and fabulous history generated within the imagination. Between 1149 and 1151 Geoffrey published a characteristic addendum to his *History of the Kings of England*, his *Vita Merlini (Life of Merlin, 1148-1151)* in Latin hexameters. With that poem Geoffrey launched himself into a sub theme., which was to have an indescribably rich history of its own, within the national traditions of Britain and Western Europe.

A sample from Paragraph 2 of Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of England: the narration tracks the life-movement of Brutus—the legendary descendant of Trojan Aeneas, and, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth, and other mediaeval fabulist historians, the first king of the Britons.

At length, after fifteen years were expired, the youth accompanied his father in hunting, and killed him undesignedly by the shot of an arrow. For, as the servants were driving up the deer towards them, Brutus, in shooting at them, smote his father under the breast. Upon his death, he was expelled from Italy, his kinsmen being enraged at him for so heinous a deed. Thus banished he went into Greece, where he found the posterity of Helenus, son of Priamus, kept in slavery by Pandrasus, king of the Greeks. For, after the destruction of Troy, Pyrrhus, the son of Achilles, had brought hither in chains Helenus and many others; and to revenge on them the death of his father, had given command that they should be held in captivity.

Brutus, finding they were by descent his old countrymen, took up his abode among them, and began to distinguish himself by his conduct and bravery in war, so as to gain the affection of kings and commanders, and above all the young men of the country. For he was esteemed a person of great capacity both in council and war, and signalized his generosity to his soldiers, by bestowing among them all the money and spoil he got. His fame, therefore, spreading over all countries, the Trojans from all parts began to flock to him, desiring under his command to be freed from subjection to the Greeks; which they assured him might easily be done, considering how much their number was now increased in the country, being seven thousand strong, besides women and children.

There was likewise then in Greece a noble youth named Assaracus, a favourer of their cause. For he was descended on his mother's side from the Trojans, and placed great confidence in them, that he might be able by their assistance to oppose the designs of the Greeks. For his brother had a quarrel with him for attempting to deprive him of three castles which his father had given him at his death, on account of his being only the son of a concubine; but as the brother was a Greek, both by his father's and mother's side, he had prevailed with the king and the rest of the Greeks to espouse his cause. Brutus, having taken a view of the number of his men, and seen how Assaracus's castles lay open to him, complied with their request.

Geoffrey of Monmouth is one of the initiators of a fabulous history for the British, and his work to illustrate and glorify the British people is itself legendary. How did he view the quasi-mythological bent of his history, or, an easier example, how did he view his later tale, the *Vita Merlini*, *Life of Merlin*, in which he contrived to bring together King Arthur, the archetypal Briton King, and a legendary magician whose afterlife shadows the entire Middle Ages—and in fact popular lore to our day?

With his embrace of the vast legend of Merlin—born of a woman, but fathered by an incubus, a prophet, shapeshifter, rogue and Romeo; mythical but one of the great characters of the actual mediaeval mind; fatherer of Arthur by means of magic and intrigue—with his embrace of this unquenchable spirit, Geoffrey opens the Pandora's box of the mediaeval historical imagination. The vast progeny of the Arthurian cycle, throughout the High Middle Ages, are evidence of a Romantic movement, within the Middle Ages, which scoops up history with a voracity not to be outdone until the later Romantic Movement, almost a millennium later, when James Macpherson, creating Ossianic poetry from the third century, once more demonstrated the hunger of the human mind for unverifiable tales.

Study guide

We comfortably categorize history as either empirical or imaginative, and have done so, in the present entry, by taking Bede and Geoffrey of Monmouth as our guides. Will that bald distinction, between two types of history, confirm its value? Are these two types of history as absolutely separate from each other as we imply? Do Bede and Geoffrey adopt absolutely opposite paths into accounting for the past? (Please devote part of your paper to precisely this issue, of the 'two paths to historical truth.')

One path on which our two historians seem to agree might be this: histories are artificial abstractions from what happened in the past, and are composed of words in action, words that project, out beyond them, diverse emblems of the past. Geoffrey's simulation of the Brutus-Britons connection, or of Merlin as the progenitor of Arthur, are his choice of paths toward characterizing the past, and in arguable ways provide us with optional insights unto the way our present has made the past into itself. Does this seem to you a legitimate perspective, onto the means at the historian's disposal, for recreating the truth?

9. Niebelungenlied 1200.

The origins

The origins of German literature lie in Norse and Icelandic saga, and embody rich traits: powerful mythological forces in conflict, an abundance of tense conflictual struggles—revenge, jealousy, lust—open battles to rule the world; subtle as well as eventual slaying--bellicose personal relations embodied inside a mythic dynamic, which leave the contemporary reader awestruck at the power of the present work, which has been called the Mediaeval *Iliad*. One might mention, just to have it before us, the extreme intricacy of plot.

The cultural tenor

The greater part of the material is neither Christian nor drawn from Classical Antiquity and therefore opens us to perspectives on humanity and nature which have not been incorporated in the mainstream of Western culture. These valuable insights take us back to pre-Christian Europe, with its rich cache of 'pagan' (largely Norse) myths, and yet that stratum of early Germanic poetry is in the present epic itself blended with the growing chivalric tradition of Christian poetry, which is by the time of the *Niebelungenlied* proving to be a component of the 'Germanic life view.' Thus we find, in this epic collated and written down around 1200 A.D., a culturally blended creation, with work of extreme antiquity—dragon-slayer motifs as in the tales of Perseus in Ancient Greece--joined to Romantic chivalric love, jealousy, and vengeance.

The narrative material of the Niebelungenlied

The work in question embodies historical memories that go back to the court of the Burgundians, who in the 4th century A.D. were foes of the declining Roman Empire; the plot continues on to incorporate elements of different stages of very late German mediaeval culture, as well as a great deal of fairy tale (*Maerchen*) and folk legend. (It might be added that the manuscript itself has been through numerous historical periods: lost entirely by the end of the 16th century; rediscovered in the 18th century in a manuscript dating from the 13th century. The consequence is that we cannot identify any specific author of the poem, which like *Beowulf*, comes out of the mists to us.) If at times the epic seems to be bursting at its seams, and running over its edges in repetition and randomness, that is because the narrative pays homage to so many different traditions.

The forming of the material

The present epic—2400 stanzas in 39 Aventuren- is thought to have been written, but then to have incorporated the writers' desire to make the epic seem to have been orally composed. (Can one think of

the example of Longfellow, in *Hiawatha*, an epic composed in trochaic tetrameters, to simulate the effect of a hypnotically repetitive archaic poem.) The consistent verse structure—four rhyming lines, each divided by a caesura, the fourth line consistently longer by one stress; over an extent of 10,000 lines—serves wonderfully to keep the ear focused on the stanzaic structure. An uptick of attention dominates each line, and builds up before the caesura; the final line is a metrical foot longer than the lines which precede it, guaranteeing a small emotional charge as an inflection to the whole stanza. The device of the elongated final line is thought to suggest derivation from a more sophisticated tradition within Germanic epic.

The main characters of the epic

The narrative centers on a few main characters—whose force, and sharp profiles, hold the fabric together. Siegfried the dragon slayer is an archaic form, the hero ready for action but prudent and ultimately a tragic victim; the hero who has rendered himself invincible—except for one tiny Achilles' heel—by bathing in the blood of the dragon he has slain; Siegfried's eventual bride, Kriemhild, whose beauty and primal sense for revenge—she avenges the murder of her husband, Siegfried—are from archaic legend; the villain hero Hagen, who is both a image of faithful vassalage, and of unreserved brutality; the dwarf Alberich, to whom the treasure of the Niebelungs is confided, and who is himself right out of the jester entourage of any mediaeval prince; the crafty Etzel (Attila the Hun, in fact) at his Hungarian court, the center of the intrigue which undergirds the second Part of the poem. In this lengthy and passionate pastiche of plots and sub plots, in which love, treachery, magic and courage compete for our fascination, we are immersed in the world of mediaeval Germanic feeling, nostalgic and contemporary pride mixed, and find ourselves engaging with those fierce archaic virtues of pride, independence, vengeance and stubbornness which were uncompromising to a degree fascinating to our more 'complex' age.

The Plot

The plot of the *Niebelungenlied* is divided into two parts, and has already been briefly sketched.

The poem opens at the Court of the Burgundian Kingdom, Kriemhild, the virgin sister of King Gunther and his brothers, has a dream of a falcon which is killed by two eagles. She takes it that her husband is intended by the falcon, and she determines not to marry. In the background, however, an awesome hero, Siegfried, is approaching; Hagen, one of the vassals of King Guenther, tells Guenther about the feats of Siegfried, who has killed, and taken the land of, two brothers—one of them called *Niebelung*—whose treasure he took, in the course of which he slew a dragon, and left a dwarf, Alberich, in charge of the treasure. One can see how much local detail enters into the summary of such an epic.

After slaying the dragon, Siegfried bathes in the dragon's blood, to render himself invincible; but during that bloody bath a single leaf from a linden tree falls on his back, and remains, forever, his dangerous 'Achilles heel.' In this way the poem keeps casting forward portents, and accumulates around itself the weight of destiny. At the present point, in the narrative, Siegfried is prevented from seeing his intended love, Kriemhild.

In the immediate future Siegfried joins the Burgundians on a voyage to Iceland, where Siegfried will aid Gunther, the brother of Kriemhild, to conquer the love trials imposed on him by the Icelandic Queen, Brunhild. Here we see the magic Siegfried, wrapped in his cloak of invisibility, which confers on him the strength of twelve men. He conquers, with Wagnerian power, giving Gunther a bride, and himself too, the Kriemhild who now yields to him.

The remainder of the epic plays out—suspense must be factored in here, for our reader's sake—around a number of key themes—the fantasy rape of Brunhild by Siegfried, the growing suspicion of Brunhild toward the social rank of Siegfried, Kriemhild's husband, the murder of Siegfried by Hagen, one of King Gunther's vassals, and the blood bath revenge of Kriemhild, who has remarried into the court of Hungary, and whose own death is preceded by her decapitation of Hagen, the murderer of her husband.

The German Iliad?

The material of the *Nibelungenlied* has played to many tunes: Wagnerian opera, in which the soaring tones of the ensemble suggest the vast depths of myth and power from which the epic rises; National Socialist self-glorification; and today, of course, cartoons and pop Siegfried songs. In the end all of these efforts miss the intra-secular richness of this historical pastiche, which has been called the German *Iliad*, in the sense that like Homer the anonymous author of this German lay brings together passionate historical materials and personages from many different versions of his own culture.

Betrayal, jealousy, and revenge all play central roles in the *Nibelungenlied*. It is as though, even in the fairly 'archaic' literary milieu of this work, the drivers are all drawn from deep human passions. Can you isolate the elements that seem to you most clearly part of the 'archaic' world? Can you do a little research on the Burgundians, whose role as enemies of the Romans in the 5th century, takes us into classical antiquity?

We noted that the *Nibelungenlied* has been called the Iliad of Germany. Do you feel that this German epic, like Homer's, concentrates on a single topic—like The Battle of Troy—and makes salient points about that topic, like the moral decision facing Achilles at the end of the epic? Or is the *Nibelungenlied* more diffuse than the Iliad? Less in control of its diverse assembled materials?

Excerpt from the beginning of the epic: Project Gutenberg text

In the Netherlands there grew the child of a noble king (his father had for name Siegmund, his mother Siegelind), in a mighty castle, known far and wide, in the lowlands of the Rhine: Xanten, men called it. Of this hero I sing, how fair he grew. Free he was of every blemish. Strong and famous he later became, this valiant man. Ho! What great worship he won in this world! Siegfried hight this good and doughty knight. Full many kingdoms did he put to the test through his warlike mood. Through his strength of body he rode into many lands. Ho! What bold warriors he after found in the Burgundian land! Mickle wonders might one tell of Siegfried in his prime, in youthful days; what honors he received and how fair of body he. The most stately women held him in their love; with the zeal which was his due.

Men trained him. But of himself what virtues he attained! Truly his father's lands were honored, that he was found in all things of such right lordly mind. Now was he become of the age that he might ride to court. Gladly the people saw him, many a maid wished that his desire might ever bear him hither. Enow gazed on him with favor; of this the prince was well aware. Full seldom was the youth allowed to ride without a guard of knights. Siegmund and Siegelind bade deck him out in brave attire. The older knights who were acquaint with courtly custom, had him in their care. Well therefore might he win both folk and land.

Now he was of the strength that he bare weapons well. Whatever he needed thereto, of this he had enow. With purpose he began to woo fair ladies; these bold Siegfried courted well in proper wise. Then bade Siegmund have cried to all his men, that he would hold a feasting with his loving kindred. The tidings thereof men brought into the lands of other kings. To the strangers and the home-folk he gave steeds and armor. Wheresoever any was found who, because of his birth, should become a knight, these noble youths were summoned to the land for the feasting. Here with the youthful prince they gained the knightly sword. Wonders might one tell of this great feast; Siegmund and Siegelind wist well how to gain great worship with their gifts, of which their hands dealt out great store. Wherefore one beheld many strangers riding to their realm. Four hundred sword-thanes (4) were to put on knightly garb with Siegfried. Many a fair maid was aught but idle with the work, for he was beloved of them all. Many precious stones the ladies inlaid on the gold, which together with the edging they would work upon the dress of the proud young warriors, for this must needs be done.

The host bade make benches for the many valiant men, for the midsummer festival, at which Siegfried should gain the name of knight. Then full many a noble knight and many a high-born squire did hie them to the minster. Right were the elders in that they served the young, as had been done to them afore.

Pastimes they had and hope of much good cheer. To the honor of God a mass was sung; then there rose from the people full great a press, as the youths were made knights in courtly wise, with such great honors as might not ever lightly be again. Then they ran to where they found saddled many a steed. In Siegmund's court the hurtling waxed so fierce that both palace and hall were heard to ring; the high-mettled warriors clashed with mighty sound. From young and old one heard many a shock, so that the splintering of the shafts reechoed to the clouds. Truncheons were seen flying out before the palace from the hand of many a knight. This was done with zeal. At length the host bade cease the tourney and the steeds were led away.

Study guide

The poet of the present epic drew widely on oral materials widespread among the Germanic tribes gradually coalescing after the fall of the Roman Empire. Do you feel the presence of a single author, or the footprint of one governing intelligence behind the poem? Would the discovery of such a voice be simplified by looking at a single theme, like revenge, which so starkly penetrates both parts of the epic? Or—and this study question concerns the identification of authors in literature—would we be more on track to look at distinctive metrical features—like number of syllables in a stanza, or the question whether the cesura is normally preceded by a feminine or a masculine emphasis. All of these micro issues go into the construction of an authorial presence in a text. Can you identify further areas deserving attention, in a text of which you are trying to determine the author?

What is the main theme of the poem? Important candidates would be: nobility and rank; revenge, magic—as in the cloak of Siegfried, which confers on him the power of many men; destiny—which from the time of Kriemhild's initial dream, seems to haunt the Burgundians. What place do you think themes, of these sorts, play in the creative imagination of a writer such as the writer of the *Nibelungenlied*? Does such a writer conceive of his material in terms of the themes that will recur in it? Or is to say that too academic? Does the writing act respond to a variety of blended impulses—memories, dreads, hopes—which ultimately coalesce into themes? For that matter, what is the special importance, in the case of Germanic epic, of the fact that the performance of it is accompanied by stringed and percussion instruments? Does the resulting *Gesamtkunstwerk*. (*Composite Artwork*) constitute anything like a pre opera? *What do you think led Wagner to the power of this work? Does his work—enjoy passages of his Nibelungenlied in moving form, on UTube—align with the written epic we have been discussing?*

10. Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) *Summa Theologiae* (1265-1279)

This study guide has been arranged by *Fortuna*, one of the reigning concepts of mediaeval thought. There is to be sure an order in the categories of work or creation featured in our twenty entries. We touch down on epic poetry, lyric poetry, travel writing, history, theology and philosophy, and mysticism. In this sense we have been trying to inhabit multiple expressions of the mediaeval world-view. and to establish markers of the extreme and often inadequately understood mediaeval period. (A topic of importance in itself is furnished by the now dated habit of calling the Middle Ages, or the period from 500-1000, the 'Dark Ages.')

In establishing our more or less fortuitous perspective, on the mediaeval period, we have here tried to keep our eyes on the larger questions of historical succession. So that, although admittedly we move at a good rate through the centuries, we note, and will in our study guide probe, the quality of succession in historical time, the question of historical time as un peeling, as we argued it in an earlier study guide, on the making of the modern European mind.

The person before us, in the present entry, was born into a noble family, near Naples; his father was a count, his paternal grandmother was a sister of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa. Thomas was as a child preternaturally drawn to symbols and catchwords of the Christian faith and although his mother opposed his early absorption into the life of the Church, he was in fact sent to the Benedictine Abbey of Montecassino for the first ten years of his educational life. From that point on, Saint Thomas

advanced to a local University, struck the surrounding clergy with his brilliance, and rapidly made his way into the profession closest to his heart, preaching and teaching.

While a genius at writing and thinking on his feet, and a passionate lover of the poor, Thomas was to remain uniquely fond of preaching, throughout his life. Preaching and writing were for Thomas intertwined, as he considered them equally parts of an instruction of the people, in the word and mind of God. From early in life Thomas had been drawn to listening for the word of God, and to the inner dialogues by which he came increasingly to find himself conscripted into the principles God had laid down for him. Those who knew him, especially in the monastic communities in which he was a participant, wondered constantly at his propensity for prayer, into which he could fall on the least provocation—his mind was ever part of that inner discourse.

The distinguished teaching life of Thomas was soon underway. As a Professor in Paris, and as a special advisor to the Pope, Thomas was to prevail over his intellectual peers, until he became one of the most recognized voices of religious expression in the Christian West. He did so, it seems, by folding into his own intelligence and verbal skill the great bodies of thought and feeling that came to him through Saint Augustine (354-430) and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) In other words, he reached back into the creative intellectual traditions of the Catholic Church, as well as into the giant synthesizer of classical thought, Aristotle, to create a new intellectual whole, firmly based in the main themes of Catholic Christianity. (This master synthesis, which was soon to find itself baptized as Thomism, and which to our day exercises potent influence in western Catholicism, was profoundly steeped in Christianity, as well as in Aristotelianism, with its distinctively stepwise processes of reasoning, and its revered themes—order, subordination, inquiry, search for ends—which Thomas managed to incorporate faultlessly into his many treatises on specific books of the Bible, and works of theology. It may be to our point, to concentrate (the approach is aleatory; on a few lines drawn at random from Aquinas's master work, *The Summa Theologica*.) We may proceed, in a fashion Thomas himself admired, as though we brought nothing to the interpretation except naked intelligence, and the groundrules of logic.

We close our eyes and lay down our forefinger on the beginning of the *Summa*. The whole text is a massive tribute to the interrelation of faith with reason, and should accordingly testify to the totality of things at any point of analysis. We should not fail at any point to touch pay dirt. A brief tussle with the following should take a step inside the method of the master, for whom the elements of logic seem to suffice: *a question is characteristically posed, answers to it tried out, and finally conclusions drawn—all following the course of basic Aristotelian logic.*

A passage from St. Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*—*First Article (I.Q.1.Art 1)*. *Editor's comments follow each item, in italics*

Whether, besides Philosophy, any Further Doctrine Is Required? (*Three objections are proposed.*)

Objection 1: It seems that, besides philosophical science, we have no need of any further knowledge. For man should not seek to know what is above reason: "Seek not the things that are too high for thee" (Ecclus. 3:22). But whatever is not above reason is fully treated of in philosophical science. Therefore any other knowledge besides philosophical science is superfluous. (*The syllogism on which Aquinas's conclusion is based, is irrefutable, given the premises included in the inquiry—that man should not seek to know what is above reason.*)

Obj. 2: Further, knowledge can be concerned only with being, for nothing can be known, save what is true; and all that is, is true. But everything that is, is treated of in philosophical science—even God Himself; so that there is a part of philosophy called theology, or the divine science, as Aristotle has proved (Metaph. vi). Therefore, besides philosophical science, there is no need of any further knowledge. (*Philosophical science lays claim to the study of the truth. No further doctrine is needed than the philosophic science which uncovers the truth—for uncovering the truth is uncovering God.*)

On the contrary, It is written (2 Tim. 3:16): "All Scripture inspired of God is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice." Now Scripture, inspired of God, is no part of philosophical science, which has been built up by human reason. Therefore it is useful that besides philosophical science, there should be other knowledge, i.e. inspired of God. (*St. Thomas interjects the caveat permitted him by holy scripture, an objection of his own to the claim that philosophic knowledge is a sufficient portal to all knowledge. It seems, says Thomas quoting scripture, that scripture itself is a loftier portal than philosophic doctrine, and should be used accordingly.*)

I answer that, It was necessary for man's salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides philosophical science built up by human reason. Firstly, indeed, because man is directed to God, as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason: "The eye hath not seen, O God, besides Thee, what things Thou hast prepared for them that wait for Thee" (Isa. 66:4). But the end must first be known by men who are to direct their thoughts and actions to the end. Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation. Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors. Whereas man's whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation. It was therefore necessary that besides philosophical science built up by reason, there should be a sacred science learned through revelation. (*The conclusion of the author. One more nail in the coffin of the notion of the idea that philosophic doctrine is an adequate final tool of knowing for men. Divine revelation takes precedence over whatever can be known by reason.*)

Aquinas proceeds, with the steadiness of nature, and of the reason which tracks it, to lay out a proposition, to review the case for that way of seeing things, then, as it happens in the present case, to refute what has been proposed and to supplant it by a vision dictated by truth and being.

Study guide

It should be noticeable, from the sample passage above, that Thomas proceeds methodically in thought. Propositions are systematically reduced to their fundamental elements, and evaluated by a stepwise scrutiny of those elements. Objections, which Thomas himself generates, lead to counter propositions formulating Thomas's own view, which always leans to the side of an orderly and meaningful cosmos, the path to understanding which was available to reason—aided by faith. (This faith-and-reason disposition of Thomas' thought is exceptionally well explained in Jacques Maritain's book, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, which indicates Thomas' studious and intricate path to the knowledge of God.)

What do you make of the blend of reason with abstraction in the personality of Aquinas. Let me explain the question, and invite you to comment. In this burly, tall, pure, loving but distracted soul there crouched a pious disciplinarian of the soul. Can you see, in him, the expostulating young male who drove a beautiful maiden from his bedroom, with curses at this devil—and who spent a thenceforth celibate life in the inwardness of God?

11. Marco Polo. (1254-1324). *Travels* 1300

Marco Polo was a Venetian merchant, believed to have travelled widely through Central Asia and China, when the Mongol Empire was at its peak. Thus he breaks out of the portrait gallery, of the present trip through the Middle Ages, and gives actual expression to that curiosity of the world which had in antiquity begun to express itself with the Romans' movement east, trampling the Hellenistic states of the Eastern Mediterranean, and in the first centuries after Christ venturing through the mountains to India and beyond, often on camel, or shipping out from Aqaba on the Red Sea, on voyages eventually planting them on the Chinese mainland.

Marco Polo first set out traveling with his father and uncle, when he himself was seventeen. Their route crossed the overland passage later dubbed the *Silk Road*, for the regular use later made of the passageways for traffic in Asian cloths, jewels, spices. Marco Polo was to be away from home from 1271 to 1295, twenty four years primarily in China, from where, after years of making his mark as a respectable merchant and man of the world, he was to become a valued diplomat for the Emperor, carrying out trusted missions which took him as far as Burma, India, and Tibet. His record of these travels, which took him to places unimagined in the West, were not to be shared with the world until much later in his life. The influence of his life and travels had by that time spread. Christopher Columbus, we will learn, carried with him to the Americas a copy of Marco Polo's *Travels*.

The entanglement of Marco Polo with the Mongol power structure can of course not have been as simple or direct as this account, of his first trip to China implies. Traveling with his uncle and father, as he was, he presented a promising spectacle to the Mongol ruler of the time, who was ensconced in his winter palace in Xanadu. As a young man in his early twenties, with untold practical experience as a trader, and with a gift for learning languages and culture, Marco Polo rapidly recommended himself to the royal court.

Two years after returning home from China, Marco set out again, with his father and uncle, to accept the invitation of the Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan. The invitation was not simple. The Khan had formed a fascination for Christianity, and had demanded, from Marco and his family, upon their return to China, holy oil from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and a convoy of one hundred priests. As it turned out, the number of accompanying priests was reduced to two, the pair of whom tired quickly of the mission and left the company. Taking off from Jerusalem, in the present instance, the Polo family continued onward, probably by camel, to the Persian port of Hormuz.

From there, finding no ocean transportation that was suitable for them, they switched onto well worn overland roads—what by the nineteenth century would be called The Silk Roads—then for three years, whether on camel or foot, they made their ways toward China, over mountain passes and through steep valleys, meeting along the way, as would be expected, people, tribes, and languages of which few western travelers had knowledge. Finally, around 1275, they arrived at the border of China, from which they went directly to Kublai Khan's palace at Xanadu (Shangdu), two hundred miles northwest of the Emperor's winter quarters in Beijing.

The Mongol Emperor., as it happened, was accustomed to using foreigners in his administration, and it was in this setting that he took Marco Polo into his court, possibly as a tax collector. Marco was kept busy doing the work of the Emperor. He was sent on a lengthy official assignment to the city of Hangzhou, which was built on a series of canals, like Venice! He was assigned to work on the borders of the Empire, in what was then Burma.

The final return home, for Marco, was characteristically arduous, complex, and unpredictable. The Polos long awaited a release from service to the Emperor, and eventually were granted it, under arduous circumstances. Marco was charged with escorting a young princess to her husband to be, the Mongol ruler of Persia. In 1292 the Polos joined a flotilla of fourteen ships departing from Guangzhou, China. The flotilla arrived in Persia after fourteen months, only to find that the Princess' intended husband was dead; she was obliged to marry the son of the deceased. The Polos remained in Persia, with Arghun's brother,

until leaving for Italy. They arrived home in 1295, the year after the death of Kublai Khan which sent the Mongol Empire into a fatal decline.

Just over forty when he returned home, Marco Polo's life was not over. He joined the navy of Venice, and was taken prisoner in a naval battle against Venice's chief rival, Genoa. While in prison he was incarcerated with a fellow prisoner of considerable literacy, who worked with Marco to write out a text of Marco's travels. This was to become the book, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, which was one of the most read texts of the Middle Ages. Upon release from prison, Marco not only prepared this text for the world, but married and fathered three children, supporting himself, as before, with trade and commerce.

Marco Polo's perceptual world

Marco Polo's extraordinary travel account opens with astounding visions onto the historical and cultural world in which he was living. (Much astonished him, for example the use of paper for currency.) Beyond his accounts of places he travelled through, however, he remains something of a personal enigma. That he had stamina and determination goes without saying, for as we see in his *Travels*, he endured walking across the Silk Road from Persia to China, and bravely survived such temporary trials as the three year ocean passage that eventually brought him back to Italy—after having deposited the Mongol Princess in Persia, and spent serious time there with the brother of the lady's once intended. Not only stamina, of course, for Marco Polo was also an exceptionally astute observer of the world he took on. Among the many passages which display his natural perception, one might think of the description of a banquet at the court of the Mongol Emperor, The internal geometry, and social insight of the passage are signs of a mind able to see shrewdly and to express forcefully.

It is as though we had a transparent narrator through whom we are the seeing of a long hall—the Emperor's central palace dining hall. We are in the mind of this awareness of the level of dignity we can occupy, as ocular center of the word portrait. We, as the Emperor and wife number one, sit on an elevated dais, with a geometrical sequence of inferiors—knights and barons and their wives—aligned before us on descending levels, so that rank is reinforced both by greater elevation and by proximity to the transparent ruler of all.

Study guide

These mediaeval study guides have to this point dealt with essentially 'literary' or at the most 'religious' issues. Marco Polo is the first merchant-traveler we have met, and even he, it must be said, was a literary figure as well as a traveler. Literary? It is not precisely that Marco Polo imagines daringly or shapes fictional plots, for in fact he comes across as what the American poet, Marianne Moore, called the 'imagination of the literal.' We observe that capacity in the characteristic way in which Marco Polo depicts a banquet at the palace of the Mongol Emperor. He is a literalist in description, but with that precision occasionally granted to literalists—think of a Durer engraving—who drive through detail out onto the other side, art.

Does it seem to you to require exceptional explanation, to understand what drove Polo to his daring life of travel? Surely it was not just business? He makes very little, in his travel accounts, of the value of striking powerful deals, of making big money. On the other hand, though, does Marco Polo seem anything like an adventurer for adventure's sake? Is there room in our world, today, for the wide traveling adventurer—the polar explorer like Shackleton, the humanist explorer like D.H. Lawrence or Henry Miller, or for work like Heinrich Boell's *Irish Diary* or Frederic Will's *A Year in Greece*? Does the mystery of curiosity explain the pressure to travel as an act in itself?

12. Meister Eckhart (1260-1325)

Christianity in Germany

The challenge of Eckhart

The Christian theme foregrounded in the legends of *Parzifal* and King Arthur, and more or less shallowly foregrounded in the poetry of a Minnesinger like Walther von der Vogelweide, is evidence of the subtle pervasion of the new Christian faith into a German culture which is still, in the thirteenth century, in transition from a version of the Middle Ages in which are embedded many elements of the ancient pagan world. The monastic tradition still provides the energy for the evolution of the Christian perspective in Germany, though it needs adding that the whole Christian project, the making of a new mind, was far less quickly developed in Germany than in England or Italy, where the bonds between late Roman and early Christian culture were formed by the first centuries after Christ's death.

Eckhart's Personal background

Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) was born of a simple tradesperson family in Thuringia, during a period when a vocation in the church was one of the most promising career paths, but one made especially difficult at Eckhart's time, by the split in the Catholic Church, whereby the power of the Papacy had shifted between Avignon, in France., and Rome. (The subsequent conflicts, which swirled around Eckhart, were in part byproducts of a deeply insecure Papacy, split down the middle by history.) At the age of eighteen Eckhart entered the Dominican order and became a monk. By taking this step he took a career decision which would lead to an active institutional role, in his order, to conflict of life-importance for this monk, and to adventures in theological/philosophical thought which would render Eckhart a figure of influence not only in German religious history but in the wider history of both his world and ours. Through his sermons, philosophical position papers, and public debates, Eckhart was to become a widely known representative of his order, teaching, preaching and writing intensively. He was twice invited to a seminary lectureship in Paris, an honor previously bestowed only on Thomas Aquinas. As a teaching monk, Eckhart was an active scholar and preacher, who left behind him a great number of scholarly-passionate sermons and articles of discussion—both in Latin and in the vernacular.

Meister Eckhart's career

As a member of the Dominican order Eckhart was soon recognized as of remarkable intellectual power. He was sent to lecture in Paris—a center of high intellectual debate among theologians, the intellectual elite of the time—then moved from one seminary or pulpit to another. All this time he was concerned not only with theology, in which his thought grew increasingly bold, but with administrative matters, like convent management, which keep him fully involved in the world. As he develops his own original thought, however, Eckhart moves increasingly into considerations which before he knows it—indeed we don't know just when—begin to attract serious critical concern from certain of his superiors. At stake in this development is what will ultimately turn into a papal accusation of heresy.

The thought of Eckhart

It is impossible to encapsulate the metaphysical thought that Eckhart now enters in his forceful determination to further the speculative traditions Catholic orthodoxy found itself in. In any case we know that by 1326 some of Eckhart's superiors have begun to support an inquisitorial campaign against his teaching and writings. The essence of their concern is Eckhart's promotion of the idea of direct access to God. The essence of their concern is the implication, considered embedded in his developing thoughts, that a direct and 'mystical' access to God is possible, and that it is grounded in the nature of our thought. The implications of such a position, for the organized church, are plainly immense. By this kind of suggestion Eckhart would seem to take the experience of *God directly onto the individual*, and, although remaining a monk, and belonging to the Church, which viewed itself as a uniquely fitting vehicle of the divine, he seemed to be adopting an independent, directly mystical relation to God, which would bypass the institution of the Church. (Martin Luther, the driving force behind Protestantism, is one of many who

were struck with the force of Eckhart's thought, and by its relevance to the simplification of the Church. Significant, that, for it indicates Eckhart's 'dangerous' proximity to the thought of the Reformation.)

Our knowledge of God

Eckhart formulated his concept of our knowledge of God, in ways that involved more than the perils of threatening the unique claims of the church, as an (at the time) all-dominating institution. When one enters the charges against Eckhart the entire matter of heresy appears highly complex, and there are reasons to suppose that the inquisition into Eckhart's thought, before the conclusion of which he died, was driven by inner factional rivalries as much as by genuine intellectual insight. The charge against him is based on an interpretation of his view of the nature of thinking, which Eckhart thought to be presuppositionless, identical with its own thought, while God, as the ultimate thought, was the base from which we are as we begin to think. Whether or not this perspective entailed assuming a direct, mediation-free address to God remains open to discussion to this day. Discussion of the topic quite naturally encompasses the self-reflection of many in post-mediaeval spiritual cults, both within and outside of Christianity.

Eckhart and Saint Thomas Aquinas

The heart of the conflict, between Eckhart and the orthodoxy of his time, comes down to his relation to St. Thomas Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologica* (1265-73) represented the dominant orthodoxy of mediaeval Christian theology—and one of the giant achievements of world philosophy. Aquinas held that the human mind is aligned to the nature of things, so that by following its course upward, from the awareness of the daily, to and through the ascendingly 'spiritual' or 'abstract' stages of knowledge, we make our ways to God, the source of all intelligibility. The order of things is the backdrop to the order of thoughts. (One sees the harmony between this kind of early systems thinking and the orderliness of orthodox Christian worship, not to mention the hierarchical organization of orthodox Christian church administration. (The coherence, of this ordered thinking, on its highest level, is the subject of the book, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, by Jacques Maritain, a French theologian and profound student of Thomas; an intellectually available text of introduction to the intricate thought of Saint Thomas. The reader wanting to unfold the present setting for the difficulties of Eckhart could profitably start on the background Maritain provides, for the understanding of Thomas.)

Eckhart's dangerous position

Eckhart was a great admirer of the thought of Saint Thomas, and may be considered a rare intellectual contemporary of Thomas. But the position Eckhart adopted, toward the knowledge of God, grew increasingly conflictual with that of Thomas, and thus with Church authority. It can be seen that any appeal to the direct knowledge of God is dangerous from the viewpoint of a clerical hierarchy considering itself the consecrated path for reaching God. We are with Eckhart not yet on the outskirts of the Reformation, which will pitch its tent on the idea of 'direct access to God,' for Eckhart works insistently inside the frame of the Church as his time knows it. Eckhart's thought perspectives, which threaten his time's orthodoxy, are much wider than those that link him with the Protestant challenge, two centuries farther down the road. Those affiliations are with aspects of the global thought of our own time, with trends in Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as with trends of trans national meditational practice—Zen, for example—which unashamedly address the source of being, through positing the knowing self as mutually inclusive of the Source of All Being.

Study Questions

Reconstruct, in your own language, the thinking of Meister Eckhart which brought down on him at least the initiation of inquisitorial charges. Can you see the view point of the administrative forces aligned against Eckhart? Can you understand] defense Eckhart gave of himself? What is that defense? Was Eckhart's thinking a danger to the organized Church of the Middle Ages?

Does the Christian thinking of Meister Eckhart seem to you to resemble the thinking of the German literary thinkers one encounters among the Minnesingers or in the legend of Parzifal? Does Eckhart, for that matter, seem to you have a literary imagination as well as a strong philosophical mind? Would that be one reason for his continuing influence, to our day, over writers of diverse orientations?

13. Dante Alighieri. 1265-1315 *La Vita Nuova* 1294

Entry created as a collaborative blend with the work of Professor Tera Frances Reid-Olds; Department of Comparative Literature, University California.

Mediaeval lyric

We have looked at lyric poetry from earlier in the Mediaeval period: *The Dream of the Rood*, Caedmon's Hymn, and the poetry/prose combination (prosimetron) which we find in Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy. Both *The Dream* and the Hymn are full hearted praises of the Christian vision, the former a celebration of Christ's bloody sacrifice, as it perfuses nature—the very bleeding tree and the moan that it emits, man's fall—the latter a particular praise of the creator as craftsman, the Holy Shaper. Boethius too writes from an intense existential awareness: he is in prison and sentenced to death, and unjustly so. Nowhere to turn inside himself, he turns to free dialogue with the spirit of Wisdom and Philosophy, from which he expects—and receives—solace. *Philosophia* serve as an idol for adulation and worship—that will recur to us we get to know Beatrice in Dante. Boethius, though, is not writing as a Christian.

Dante

Six or seven hundred years transpire between the ardent spirit-centered lyric of the early Middle Ages, and the work of Dante, rejoicing as it does in the *dolce stil nuovo*, with its cult of woman, beauty, and the ideal. The *dolce stil*, in fact, required as its backdrop the development of western Christianity into an idealist cult—a cult which could flourish under the aegis of the widely adored image of the Virgin Mary, as well as through the maturing, of courtly society, to a point where social intercourse could afford to pay for women of elegance with little to do except to ornament their male counterparts, and serve as quasi-ideal emblems of the divine. (Doesn't the fashion industry, in our day, strive to embalm today's beauties in that same ideological fluid?) Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1528) . in his *Courtier*, provides abundant examples of the kind of milieu to which we refer.

The New Life

Dante composed the *New Life* (*La Vita Nuova*) between 1292 and 1294. A combination of prose and poetry, the *Vita* consists of forty-two chapters and serves as a retrospective view of the author's life. Dante recounts significant moments from his past and contextualizes his poetry within these moments, providing us with both literary and autobiographical insight into his works. The book begins with the poet's introduction to Beatrice Portinari in childhood, establishing her as the muse for his subsequent ruminations on the nature of Love. The *New Life* concludes shortly after Beatrice's death, with Dante's declaration that he will no longer write poetry about her: instead, he will endeavor to honor her in a greater work. That work will be *The Divine Comedy*.

The poems in *The New Life*

There are thirty-one poems in the *New Life*, introduced in chronological order, many of which invoke the personification of Love. Dante experiments with his verse, incorporating sonnets, ballads and Provençal poems. Dante's poetic style can throughout be described as "sweet new style," the *dolce stil nuovo*. This term, coined by Dante himself in *The Divine Comedy*, blends both romantic and divine love, describing the praised woman's beauty in terms of angelic figures and heavenly paradise, and daringly suggesting that even the divine can be enhanced by the beauty of such women. Dante's closing remarks in Chapter 42 hint at the prominent role Beatrice will play in his epic, *The Divine Comedy*, where she will serve as the poet's intercessor and guide to heaven.

How The New Life Unfolds

In the opening of *The New Life*, Dante describes a “book of memory” in his mind and a section of it that contains the experiences of his “new life.” It is this section of his memory that he intends to revisit in this book, beginning with his first experience of Love when, at the age of nine, he sees the young and beautiful Beatrice.

Vision

Nine years later, Beatrice looks at Dante and greets him on the street, an encounter that intoxicates him and inspires a vision. In this vision, a man appears to Dante, carrying a sleeping Beatrice in his arms and the poet’s heart in one hand. Beatrice wakes up and eats the heart, and shortly afterwards, the man begins to weep, enfolding Beatrice in his arms; then he departs with her towards heaven. This vision inspires one of Dante’s sonnets, which explains that the male figure from the vision is the personification of Love. In this sonnet, Dante requests help from his audience to interpret what he saw. Following his vision, he describes a growing obsession with Beatrice which makes him physically ill.

The Sonnet in question

Weep, Lovers, sith Love’s very self doth weep,
And sith the cause for weeping is so great;
When now so many dames, of such estate
In worth, show with their eyes a grief so deep:
For Death the churl has laid his leaden sleep
Upon a damsel who was fair of late,
Defacing all our earth should celebrate,—
save virtue, which the soul doth keep.
Now hearken how much Love did honour her.
I myself saw him in his proper form
Bending above the motionless sweet dead,
And often gazing into Heaven; for there
The soul now sits which when her life was warm
Dwelt with the joyful beauty that is fled.

(Be it said, before the sonnet takes us astray into niceties of Dante’s prosody, or the marvelous finesse of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s translation of this refined language, that both the splendor and the tragedy of the beautiful woman are caught in the generous web of this sonnet.)

Mistaken Gaze

Dante goes on to describe an incident in church, where another woman mistakes his gazing at Beatrice to be directed at her. To mask his feelings for Beatrice, he encourages the misunderstanding and writes a series of poems for this unnamed woman. Dante is troubled when the woman leaves the city, and he writes a sonnet that – on the surface – laments her departure. The truth, Dante writes, is that his heartbreak is inspired by Beatrice. He finds himself blindsided by his own deviousness.

Death and Grief

A young woman and friend of Beatrice dies. Knowing that she and Beatrice were close, Dante grieves for the deceased and writes two sonnets in honor of her: the first, addressed to Love, and the second, to Death. His mind is torn with these intensities.

Rejection Dante travels away from the city of Florence, during which time scandalous rumors spread about his relationship with the unnamed woman from the church. He suspects these rumors are to blame when he encounters Beatrice upon his return and she refuses to greet him. Denied Beatrice’s attention,

Dante comes to realize that his happiness is dependent on her acknowledgment. Depressed by the rejection, Dante retreats from public life and experiences another vision of the Lord of Love, who urges Dante to write a poem to Beatrice, revealing the depth of his feelings for her. Inspired by this vision, the poet composes a ballad, declaring himself to be his lady's servant and expressing the hope that she will pity him.

Another Embarrassment

Dante next encounters Beatrice at a wedding which he attends with a friend. Overcome by Love at the sight of her, he grows faint and leans against a nearby painting. His strange behavior is noticed and mocked by Beatrice's companions, which embarrasses Dante. After the wedding, he writes another sonnet for Beatrice, explaining the reason behind his swooning. Dante wrestles with this question: considering how much he suffers from unrequited love, why does he continue to seek Beatrice out? Dante writes two sonnets in defense of his actions, concluding that Love has a painful hold on him. His poems are a running analysis of the grip of his love.

What is Love?

Dante decides, following a brief discussion with a group of ladies, to forego his melancholy poetry and focus on the bliss of loving Beatrice. He composes a poem in which he praises her virtue and encourages those worthy to seek her out. Later, Dante responds to a query from a friend: *what is his definition of love?* In two sonnets, Dante describes love as a potential force, or power, that resides in the heart and comes to life in response to the gaze of Beatrice.

Beatrice's Loss

Dante reveals that Beatrice's father has passed away. He eavesdrops on the ladies who have visited her, and in overhearing how grief-stricken she is, he writes two more sonnets. One describes the poet's questions and concern for Beatrice's wellbeing, and the second consists of responses to those questions which he overheard while eavesdropping on the ladies who comforted her.

Vision of Death

Dante suffers from a severe illness that leaves him bedbound for nine days. (The number nine is crucial for Dante throughout his spiritual journey; the self multiple of three, the emblem of the Trinity.) During this time, he contemplates mortality, his own and Beatrice's. The thought of Beatrice dying causes him to physically convulse and to imagine a world in which the sky darkens, birds fall and earthquakes rumble. In his imagination, angels gather singing praises and Dante understands the Beatrice is dead. As he weeps, Dante is awakened from his vivid dream by the concerned voice of a young lady (presumably a close female relative) at his bedside.

Beatrice's Power

After Dante recovers from his illness, he reflects on the positive reception Beatrice elicits when she walks through the city: he composes two sonnets, which describe the effect of her virtue on others. She inspires happiness and goodness. He later writes a verse which addresses – specifically – how Beatrice influences him. His love tosses him back and forth between passion and the terror of losing his dream-lady.

Beatrice's Death

Dante is in the midst of another verse when he receives news that Beatrice has died. He describes the circumstances of her death, the impact it had on the city, and his own grief. In yet another poem, he reflects not only on his anguish but on Beatrice's ascension to heaven. Following the publication of his poem, Dante is approached by a friend to write a sonnet in honor of a young lady who has died (he

suspects, though she is unnamed, the lady is Beatrice) and decides to write two poems in honor of his friend's loss. The close relationship between this friend and Beatrice suggests he may be her brother.

Split Loyalties

One year after Beatrice's death, Dante composes an anniversary poem in honor of her. He also describes periodic (unspoken) encounters with a beautiful and compassionate lady who he sees standing at a window. The lady inspires him to compose additional poems in honor of Love. This is also a source of conflict for Dante, who feels guilty for finding comfort in this new lady. (He always punishes himself for any imagined lapse of loyalty to Beatrice.) He feels an obligation to remain loyal to Beatrice after death. His divided thoughts are represented in his poetry, until he vividly recalls their first meeting as children. This memory causes him to renew his dedication to Beatrice. He is revived.

Conclusions

Dante describes writing several more sonnets, some in response to the arrival of pilgrims in Florence and others at the request of noble ladies. *The New Life* concludes with Dante's decision not to write further poetry about Beatrice until he can devise a more worthy way to honor her.

Themes in the *Vita Nuova*

Human Love: Love is the central theme of the *New Life* and it manifests throughout this work as both a personification (Love) and a human emotion (love).

The title itself refers to Dante's "new life" which begins the day he sees – and falls in love with – Beatrice. He describes the blissful highs and the melancholic lows of harboring this devotion for her, including the physiological effects love has on the body: from frailty to swooning and weeping. Each of the thirty-one poems included in the book reflects some facet of the author's love for Beatrice: he refers to himself as her servant and slave, lauds her beauty, describes her virtue, pleads for her compassion, laments his heartache, and grieves for her death. Love consumes the poet, and in this way it is described as both ecstatic and dangerous: his *happiness, health and well-being are intertwined with* love of Beatrice. By concentrating on this theme, the spirituality of secular love, one might say, Dante joins such writers as Sappho, Elizabeth Barret Browning, or C.S. Lewis, in diving into the turbulent intensity of love.

Divine Love: *Divine love itself is the love that moves the universe and all the stars*, as Dante himself says at the very end of *The Divine Comedy*. To further illustrate the power of Love, Dante personifies it as a young and attractive nobleman who appears to him in visions, often to give him advice on the subject of Beatrice, and throughout his poetry. Dante often invokes Love in a way that is not dissimilar from God; he issues prayers and pleads for guidance from this figure. He even refers to Beatrice as an *angel* of Love. In the *New Life*, Dante gives voice to four competing ideas about Love, among which is the push-pull of good and evil: on the one hand, Love is good because it diverts the mind from evil thoughts but on the other hand, Love is evil because the more intensely one loves, the more one suffers. Within the *New Life*, Dante vacillates between good and evil. His love for Beatrice inspires him creatively and spiritually, but it is also the source of pain.

Life and Death

As the title of his book suggests, the cycle of life and death is also a theme of Dante's poetry. He is "reborn" once he experiences love for the first time, and the power of love is illustrated through its influence on the living and its persistence after death. Dante finds purpose and meaning in his "new life" through his love of Beatrice, revealing in his poetry how love can impact one's quality of life (i.e., health and happiness). As he struggles through depressive periods and illness, Dante contemplates mortality. He references several deaths in the *New Life*: the deaths of Beatrice's father and companion, his own eventual death, and the death of Beatrice herself. Each death is an opportunity – in poetry – for Dante to ruminate on the relationship of love and grief. It is through his love of Beatrice that Dante grieves for the people she has lost, and he remains committed to her memory years after she has passed. The final

chapters of the *New Life* explore life after the death of a loved one, the difficulty of moving on, and the importance of memory.

14. Boccaccio 1313-1375 *The Decameron* (1353)

The setting

Along with the poets Dante (1265-1321) and Petrarch (1304-1374), Boccaccio (1313-1375) is one of the 'three crowns' of Italian literature. *The Decameron* was written 1313 in the vernacular (Tuscan Italian) as opposed to Latin, making it accessible to a broader audience. It is a masterpiece of medieval Italian prose, influencing subsequent generations of authors. Boccaccio completed *The Decameron* (*Ten Days*) between 1349 and 1351. It is a collection of one hundred tales—think back to the tales Marguerite de Navarre assembled in *The Heptameron*, also dealing with a delaying calamity, flooding-- connected by way of a frame narrative—and forward to other great plague texts, like Swift's *Journal of the Plague Year* or Albert Camus' *La Peste*.

Set during the plague ravaging Florence in 1348, Boccaccio introduces ten young nobles (seven women and three men) who have fled the city (and the sickness) to take shelter in a remote villa in the countryside. To pass the time, they complete chores during the day and tell stories at night. Each night, someone is appointed the "king" or "queen" and they determine what the theme of the next day's stories should be. At the conclusion of one hundred stories—two weeks of story telling-- Boccaccio addresses his intended audience of noble ladies, imagining and responding to their critiques and observations of his work.

The frame story

Boccaccio's frame story for *The Decameron* refers directly to the Black Death, a bubonic plague which reached Florence in 1348 and killed roughly half of the city's population—possibly as much as 100,000 individuals. Boccaccio's fictionalized account of the ten young nobles who escaped the city is informed by his first-hand experience as a survivor of the plague and a witness to its devastating impact on Florence. This makes *The Decameron* a significant historical document, as well as an immensely influential literary document.

The Plague

The narrator, the author Boccaccio, warns his readers that what follows may be distressing, then goes on to describe the events leading up to the plague in Florence and the chaos that ensued: symptoms of illness, medical misinformation, the avoidance of others, and the destabilization of the social order. Those suspected to be sick are abandoned by their family members and neighbors, and the dead are too numerous to receive last rites.

The Storytellers

Boccaccio then shifts his attention to a group of friends: seven noble ladies, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven, who live in the same neighborhood of Florence. To protect their identities, Boccaccio gives them nicknames. One day, when these friends meet at a church, one of them suggests they leave the city to protect themselves from sickness and social unrest. The others agree and invite three young noblemen to join them. The group departs from the city and travels to a remote villa in the countryside. To occupy themselves, they nominate a leader for each day who will take charge of the entertainment. The tales they tell are the meat of the *Decameron*; we will sample three of them, to suggest the character of the entertainment.

The tales: three samples

Story 1 Ser Cepparello

A wealthy merchant searches for someone devious enough to recover money he had lent to a group of Burgundians. The Burgundians have the reputation of being two-faced and unethical, so the merchant is in the market for a man with an equally duplicitous reputation. He comes across Ser Cepparello, who takes great pleasure in immorality. The merchant employs Cepparello and sends him to Burgundy, where he is not well known.

An Unexpected Illness During his stay, Cepparello contracts a fatal illness. His condition worsens and on his death bed, he overhears his caretakers debating what to do with him: they are afraid if they turn him out that will damage their reputation. If he dies without a confessor, his body will be tossed into a ditch, but who would forgive such an evil man? Cepparello assures his caretakers that if they summon the holiest friar they know, he will take care of it.

The Confession The friar arrives at Cepparello's bedside, and he gives a false confession to the holy man, painting the picture of a virtuous man, one who is chaste, devout in his prayers, generous with charities, and proactive in defending the victimized or downtrodden wherever he encounters them. The friar is so persuaded by this confession that he not only grants Cepparello absolution but believes him to be an extremely devout man.

A Liar's Legacy Following Cepparello's death, the friar provides evidence to his fellow friars, detailing the deceased's virtues according to his confession. The other friars are persuaded by his case and hold a vigil over Cepparello's body. News of his virtuous character spreads, inspiring great devotion in others. He is eventually canonized as a saint.

Story 2. Peronella and the Jar

The Scheme In the city of Naples, a poor man marries a pretty girl named Peronella. With his labor and her spinning, the couple gets by on a meager living. But Peronella attracts the attention of a young man who seduces her. The lovers hatch a scheme to see each other without getting caught, taking advantage of her husband's work schedule.

A Man in a Jar One day, Peronella's husband arrives home earlier than expected. As soon as she hears his knock on the door, she urges her lover to climb into a large storage jar to hide. She greets her husband and he gives her good news: he has agreed to sell a large storage jar in exchange for five silver ducats, which will keep bread on the table for over a month.

Quality Control Peronella lies to her husband, claiming that she has arranged to sell the pot for seven ducats to a man who has just climbed into the pot to determine whether it is of good quality. Her lover jumps out of the jar to play along with the charade, agreeing to buy it. While her husband cleans out the jar, Peronella and her lover have another amorous encounter. Afterwards, the lover pays for the jar which the husband delivers to his home.

Story 3. Griselda

A Marriage Under Pressure: The Marquis of Saluzzo is pressured by his subjects to find a wife. He eventually settles for an impoverished young woman in a nearby village who strikes him as both virtuous and beautiful. Her name is Griselda. The Marquis arranges to marry her on one condition: that she promise to do everything in her power to please him, to always be agreeable and obedient to him. Griselda consents and the two are married.

A Daughter's Death Following the birth of their first child, a daughter, the Marquis decides that he needs to test his wife's patience by subjecting her to mind games. He begins by making hurtful remarks about her upbringing and eventually orders the pretend death of their daughter. A servant arrives to take the child away. While Griselda believes she is dead, in truth the Marquis arranges for her to be secretly raised and educated in a distant city.

The Son's Demise The Marquis decides on the same cruel course of action after their son is born. A servant arrives to take him away under the same illusion. Leading his wife to believe their child has been murdered, the Marquis instead sends him to be raised alongside his sister. Griselda bears this grief with perfect obedience to her husband, while the Marquis' actions make him unpopular with his subjects.

The Fake Annulment The Marquis arranges for counterfeit letters to come from Rome, giving his wife the impression that the marriage has been annulled by the Church. He decides to strip her of her finery and send her back to her father's house with nothing. Griselda accepts her husband's decision and returns to work for her family, while the Marquis spreads a rumor that he has found another wife, the daughter of a count.

The New Wife The Marquis summons Griselda and tells her to prepare the household for his new wife, a task which she accepts out of love for him. In advance of the wedding banquet, the Marquis arranges for his son and daughter to be brought home. He leads the banquet attendees and his wife to believe their daughter is his future bride. Only then is the Marquis satisfied that he has tested his wife enough. He reveals that his cruelty has been an act, reunites mother and children, and promises to honor her as a husband should.

Themes of the Decameron

In *The Decameron*, each day is assigned a particular topic which the storytellers must incorporate into their tales. Themes that recur throughout *The Decameron* are stories about misfortune, love, gender roles, cleverness, and hypocrisy (particularly of the church). Both class and religion play prominent roles in the stories, particularly in representations of the merchant class and medieval Christianity. Many stories are comedic in nature, involving happy endings or satisfying comeuppances for the characters. This reinforces the purpose of storytelling within the frame narrative: to entertain a group of young men and women.

Religion: A central theme of *The Decameron* is religion. Some stories deal with conversion, examining the relationship between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Others critique the shortcomings of the Church, including its corruption and hypocrisy. In the story (above) of Ser Cepparello, the friar who takes his confession is depicted as devout but flawed in his judgment (resulting in the canonization of the devious Cepparello). This underlines the larger point of the story: the clergy may serve as intermediaries between people and God, but they are human, too. Priests and friars make mistakes and exercise poor judgment.

Love: Romantic love is one of the prevailing themes of *The Decameron*. The power of love to cloud one's judgment can be seen in the figure of Peronella's husband, story 2, who is so enamored with his young, beautiful wife that he weathers her criticisms and insults and accepts what she says at face value, never suspecting that she may be cheating on him. The power of love is also reflected in Griselda's unwavering devotion to her husband (story 3): it is said that she loves her children deeply, and yet she submits to her husband's wishes and gives them up. Even the storyteller acknowledges that it would have served the marquis right if Griselda had found another husband who treated her better. Out of love for him, she forgives the deception.

Class: Throughout *The Decameron*, Boccaccio emphasizes that virtue is not linked to class. Many of the stories reflect the conditions of the merchant class, to which Boccaccio belonged, and examine the impact of wealth on relationships. Rich merchants of dubious character are present throughout the tale of Ser Cepparello, and the strain of poverty on a relationship is reflected in the interactions between Peronella and her husband. The marriage between Griselda and her husband, the Marquis of Saluzzo, is notable because it is a union of two social classes. The distinction between Griselda's humble origins and her husband's nobility is a point of contention during his tests, as he emphasizes that neither she nor her children are good enough for him or for his subjects. His decision to kill the children (which is not carried out) is motivated, in part, by the fact that no one will accept them as legitimate heirs. Although it is revealed that the Marquis does not genuinely believe what he has said, the words reflect some of the challenges of pursuing romantic relationships across class boundaries.

Romance and marriage: Relationship dynamics between men and women are a common theme in *The Decameron*, reflecting the attitudes of the young storytellers. There are tales of deception, mind games, and one-upmanship between spouses, exploring themes of seduction, heartbreak, love, and patience. The story of Peronella and the Jar, for example, is told in response to the day's theme: stories of women who trick their husbands to get what they want. The story of Griselda reflects another romantic dynamic: that of a virtuous and steadfast wife who, when subjected to horrific torments and tests by her husband, remains loyal, obedient, and deferential to him in accordance with her marriage vows.

Wit: Many of the stories in *The Decameron* deal with human nature, inviting the reader to reflect on their own virtues and vices. One of the celebrated virtues in the collection is a quick wit, or intelligence, which allows an individual to avoid misfortune and/or achieve their goals. While Ser Cepparello is irredeemable, he achieves sainthood posthumously because of his cleverness. On his deathbed, he knows what to say to the friar to ensure that he is absolved and will be buried in the church. Peronella's story is another celebration of quick wit, as she improvises a scenario to hide her infidelity from her husband. The marital infidelity is not commented on by the narrator because the focus of the story is on her cleverness. It fulfills the storyteller's goal of demonstrating how women are as capable of trickery as men.

Vices: In addition to exploring virtues, the stories of *The Decameron* also examine vices with special emphasis on greed and lust. The wealthy merchant who hires Ser Cepparello is motivated by greed and Ser Cepparello himself can be read as an amalgamation of vice, due to his many crimes: he has drawn up false documents, given false witness, instigated conflict, blasphemed, committed murder and theft. He is described as a gluttonous pervert, gambler, and cheat. Passing judgment on Cepparello, the narrator declares that he is the worst man in the world. The vice of lust is present in Peronella's story of marital infidelity, but interestingly, it is neither explicitly critiqued nor punished. The lack of moralizing in these stories emphasizes their purpose: not to teach lessons, per se, but to entertain an audience.

Study guide

We have limited our examples, from the hundred tales Boccaccio tells—or adapts, or borrows. What do you think of this kind of point making, by short tales? Do you acquire a sense of Boccaccio's world view, even from a close inspection of the three examples we provide here? When it comes to the patient Griselda, does Boccaccio express his sympathy for women? Would that be an example of wide human sympathy, at this era? What do you think of the views of Petrarch and Dante, Boccaccio's great contemporaries, when it comes to the contribution of women to culture and society? Petrarch adulates the Laura, who motivates his history expanding sonnets. Does literature pick up the tendencies of the higher culture of its time? If so, in the present instance what do you think of the worship Dante expresses toward Beatrice? Is Beatrice a model of the infinite value of woman? Or is Beatrice a representative of the order of the universe? Please answer any of the broad questions folded into the foregoing study provocation.

15 William Langland. (1330-1387) *Piers Plowman* 1377

What is *Piers Plowman*?

Piers Plowman is an allegorical moral and social satire, written as a "vision" of the common medieval type. The poet falls asleep in the Malvern Hills and dreams that in a wilderness he comes upon the tower of Truth (God) set on a hill, with the dungeon of Wrong (the Devil) in the deep valley below, and a "fair field full of folk" (the world of living men and women) between them. He describes satirically all the different classes of people he sees there; then a lady named Holy Church rebukes him for sleeping and explains the meaning of all he sees. Further characters (Conscience, Liar, Reason and so on) enter the action; Conscience finally persuades many of the people to turn away from the Seven Deadly Sins and go in search of St. Truth, but they need a guide.

Piers (Peter), a simple Plowman, appears and says that because of his common sense and clean conscience he knows the way and will show them if they help him plow his half acre. Some of the company help, but some shirk; and Piers becomes identified with Christ, trying to get men to work toward

their own material relief from the current abuses of worldly power. In the last section of the poem, much less coherent than the rest, the dreamer goes on a rambling but unsuccessful summer-long quest, aided by Thought, Wit, and Study, in search of the men who are Do-Well, Do-Bet and Do-Best.

Prologue to Piers Plowman

In a summer season when soft was the sun,
I clothed myself in a cloak as I shepherd were,
Habit like a hermit's unholy in works,
And went wide in the world wonders to hear.
But on a May morning on Malvern hills,
A marvel befell me of fairy, methought.
I was weary with wandering and went me to rest
Under a broad bank by a brook's side,
And as I lay and leaned over and looked into the waters
I fell into a sleep for it sounded so merry.

Then began I to dream a marvellous dream,
That I was in a wilderness wist I not where.
As I looked to the east right into the sun,
I saw a tower on a toft worthily built;
A deep dale beneath a dungeon therein,
With deep ditches and dark and dreadful of sight
A fair field full of folk found I in between,
Of all manner of men the rich and the poor,
Working and wandering as the world asketh.
Some put them to plow and played little enough,
At setting and sowing they sweated right hard
And won that which wasters by gluttony destroy.

Some put them to pride and apparelled themselves so
In a display of clothing they came disguised.
To prayer and penance put themselves many,
All for love of our Lord living hard lives,
In hope for to have heavenly bliss.
Such as anchorites and hermits that kept them in their cells,
And desired not the country around to roam;
Nor with luxurious living their body to please.

The author

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 serious contemporary poets—compliant in his long, three stress alliterative 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. In the following we give a caption survey of the contents, quickly tracing the 'plot,' then looking into our main concern, the nature of the kind of allegorical thinking from which Langland—like John Bunyan three hundred years later—created his world vision.

The story of Piers Plowman; critical comments

Vision 1

The poem begins in the [Malvern Hills](#), between [Worcestershire](#) and [Herefordshire](#). A man named Will (either simply a personal name or an allegory for a person's will, in the sense of 'desire, intention') falls asleep and envisions a tower set upon a hill and a fortress (*donjon*) in a deep valley; between these symbols of heaven and hell is a 'fair field full of folk', the world of humankind. A satirical account of different sections of society follows. The trope of a wide lens optic onto the human condition could remind us of many movements in great literature: The messenger's speech, in Aeschylus' *Persians*, in which a haunted voice reports, of the battle that defeats Xerxes, that 'I did not know that death had undone so many'; a passage powerfully picked up by T.S. Eliot in the *Four Quartets*.

Passus (section) 1: Holy Church visits Will and explains the tower of Truth, and discusses Truth more generally. Langland risks the most irrefragable languages, fearing not to personify Holy Church. Haven't we to ask ourselves whether Langland's entire world perception differs from that our time makes possible for us? Don't we enjoy an (often empty) freedom to criticize our highest institutions?

Passus 2: Will sees Lady Mede ('payment') and finds out about her planned marriage to False. From this point on we begin to appreciate the role of the satirical in Langland's vision; satire, like allegorical thinking, personifies vices or virtues, then evaluates them like people.

Passus 3: Lady Mede travels to the royal court; the King proposes she marry Conscience; but Conscience denounces her. The poet is reliably on the side of clean conscience. Piers serves regularly as the exponent of this virtue.

Passus 4: Conscience and Reason convince the King not to marry Mede to False. Will wakes up.

Vision 2

Passus 5: Will falls back to sleep. Reason gives a sermon to the Field of Folk and the people decide to repent. The [Seven Deadly Sins](#) make confession and in penance attempt to go on pilgrimage to St Truth. They get lost, and Piers Plowman makes his first appearance: he will help the penitents if they help him plough his half-acre. Piers Plowman will from now on appear working to plough his acres, occasionally struggling as though bearing the cross of Christ, more often appearing as a simple honest man attempting to live a moral life. In this latter role he resembles a mediaeval Everyman.

Passus 6: Piers and the penitents plough the half-acre. Some people refuse to work, and Hunger punishes them until they work. But once Hunger has been sated, the people return to idleness. Such is mankind, saith Langland.

Passus 7: Eventually, Truth sends Piers a pardon for the penitents' sins; its main content is 'Do well and have well and God shall have your soul' and 'Do evil and have evil, and expect nothing other than that after your death, the Devil shall have your soul'. When challenged on the pardon's validity by a priest, Piers angrily tears it in two. Will is awakened by their arguing and, musing on his dreams, decides to seek 'Do-wel.'

Vision 3

Passus 8: Will's search for Do-wel begins. He enters into a disputation with Friars. He then falls asleep once more and meets Thought. Thought instructs Will in 'Do well, do better, do best'. Practical interpretation of what these concepts mean is to be provided by Witl.

Passus 9: There is an extended allegory featuring Dowel and the Castle of Flesh, exposing the need for people to be governed by their 'Inwit'. The text discusses poverty and marriage. Wit makes further inroads to understanding Dowel, as active virtue.

Passus 10: Will meets Wit's wife, Dame Study. She complains to Will about his ignorance. Will then proceeds to Clergy and Scripture to learn more about Dowel. He considers what value scholarship might have in helping him achieve salvation. Langland's sense of the immediately pertinent, in his critique, gives

his imaginative work its lasting power. His mind is forever on improvement, and though this sounds Pollyanna it is not, for Langland shares with us the conviction that moral value is inexhaustible and forever to be reacquired.

Passus 11: Scripture complains about Will's lack of self-knowledge. Angered, Will (who is already dreaming) goes to sleep and has a dream-within-a-dream in which he meets Fortune. He serves her into old age, but she abandons him. Will learns about the salvation of the [Emperor Trajan](#) and the power of love. Kynde ('character, natural disposition, nature', here understood as an aspect of God) shows Will the world. Will has an argument with Reason: Reason, Will concludes, does not do enough to keep people from sin; but Reason disagrees. Will awakes from the dream-within-a-dream. He now meets Imaginative, who advises Will to be patient. This vivid discourse between imagination and reason (with all its limits) clarifies the priority Langland always gives to the full hearted interpretation of human events.

Passus 12: Imaginatif teaches Will, bringing together and improving his understanding of earlier discussions in the poem. Imaginatif emphasises the need for humility and the importance of Grace.

Vision 4

Passus 13: Will awakens and then falls back to sleep; he dreams of sharing a feast with Conscience, Scripture, Clergy and Patience; he encounters a greedy Doctor of Divinity (who later shows disdain for love) and as well as eating actual food also dines on spiritual food. Piers the Plowman offers a definition of Do Well, Do Better and Do Best. Then Conscience and Patience meet Haukyn the Active Man, who wears a coat of Christian faith which is, however, soiled with the Seven Deadly Sins.

Passus 14: Conscience teaches Haukyn to seek forgiveness and do penance; Patience teaches Haukyn about the merits of embracing poverty. Haukyn cries out for God's mercy, which awakens Will.

Vision 5

Passus 15: Will finds himself alienated from the waking world, but Reason helps him to go back to sleep, whereupon Will meets Anima ('spirit'). Anima tells Will off for his pride in wanting to know too much, but goes on to talk about charity, in particular how the Church should care for its flock, but how its priests and monks do not always fulfil this duty. Talking to Anima, Will starts to conclude that Piers the Plowman is Christ. Will realises that he needs to switch from searching for Dowel to searching for Charity. Will realizes that the extraordinary grace apparent in Piers Plowman is his participation in the face of him which is Christ.

Passus 16: Will falls into another dream-within-a-dream, this time about the Tree of Charity, whose gardener is Piers the Plowman. Will participates in a re-enactment of the Fall of Man and then has a vision of the life of Christ; when this reaches the point where the Devil is defeated, Will wakes up from the dream-within-a-dream. Will goes looking for Piers and meets Faith/Abraham, who is himself searching for Christ. In the dream within a dream, of this natural dreamer, Will, the dreamer retreats to the origins of man in sin, and is led by Piers to the footsteps of Abraham and faith.

Passus 17: Next, Will meets Hope/Moses, characterized by the tablets of law, who is also in search of Christ. Will learns about the Good Samaritan, the prospect of salvation, and the importance of Love. He wakes up.

Vision 6

Passus 18: Will sleeps again, and experiences the climactic section of *Piers Plowman*. He experiences Love and the intersection of human and divine time. Will witnesses Christ/the Good Samaritan/Piers Plowman riding into Jerusalem and Christ's crucifixion. He then witnesses the [Four Daughters of God](#) (Truth, Justice, Mercy, Peace) in debate; the Harrowing of Hell; and Redemption. Will is swept into high theology by experience of love, which Piers frees in him. Will wakes again, and now exhorts his family to hear Mass.

Vision 7

Passus 19: During the mass, Will falls back to sleep and meets Conscience once more. Conscience recounts the life and Passion of Christ and how Piers/Peter was given his power by Grace/Christ. In a state of change, Will moves forever in and out of dream. Piers assumes different forms—an honest man of the soil, in search of the honest life, a straightshooting Will finds out about Pentecost; once more sees Piers as a ploughman, and witnesses Pride attacking Unity/Holy Church. He wakes up and records his dream about it and its characters. Will and Piers Plowman are both consciousness satirist, with a moral self-confidence deriving from his own Christlike nature. Does Will share in that nature, as he dreams?

Vision 8

Passus 20: While awake, Will meets Need. He falls asleep again and now dreams of the Antichrist. Kynde sends Old Age, Death, and Pestilence, to chastise people: Will is attacked by Old Age. He witnesses Holy Church undermined by a hypocritical Friar. Conscience goes on pilgrimage to seek Piers the Plowman, and calls on Grace for help—whereupon Will wakes up. The search for Piers, which is a theme of this entire poem, leads back into a certain transcendence of Will's self.

The imagination at work

The action, above, opens on the picture of a world-trudging pilgrim (Will) dreaming of “Christ's passion and pain” and of His people, which includes one Piers the Plowman, a slightly tweaked version of Will himself. (Will is an abstract notion, like Mede, False, Hunger, Fortune, Truth, Conscience, Clergy; a blend of nouns and adjectives, which all serve equally to stand in for essential human conditions. Will is the overall observer, while Piers is the active doer who mobilizes the interactions of the whole narrative.) Through the lens of dream, Piers allows allegorical figures to play across an account of the tale of Christ's life and sacrifice, as it is embedded in the sacred tales that substantiate the central Christian mystery.

Types of Imagination

In many ways the Christian mediaeval imagination—allegorical, indirect, trading in symbols drawn from intense belief, personifications of human conditions—is hard for us to read, harder either than ancient classical literature—whose obscurities derive from undetermined references or even than the difficult works of our own time, like James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* which requires a detailed commentary, which jumbles reality and history after a fashion meant to reconfigure, for the reader, his/her entire landscape of cultural symbols. Erich Auerbach's book *Mimesis* takes us down the pathway of interpretive mindsets, helping us to value the angle inside language from which Langland transmutes the ordinary play of reference through the imagination, under the spell of a formal narrative. The kind of analysis Auerbach brings to the varieties of mimetic form helps free us—still prisoners of the romantic, as we are—to explore older and less familiar styles of world recreation through language. Another useful run-up, to reading *Piers Plowman* might be Charles Williams' *Descent into Hell* (1937), for a scary and profound twentieth century mediaeval type thriller, with some kinship to Langland's thought world. Here we find language which aligns with the satiric as well as the transcendent of fictional speech, though the characters carry the back drop of their historical moments far more conspicuously than does Piers, who never quite ‘belongs to a place.’)

Langland and some great texts

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. Dante comes directly to mind with his own vision of the pageant of human conditions which make up the whole society of human being. I think equally of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the narrator of which steps back,

like Piers through Will, into a place from which he can survey the global nixus upward rising toward salvation. Similar strategies of comprehensive perception, and carefully aligned imagination, buttress the work of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, or Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdottir*. In both of those novels the historical world is seen from some point like Piers', rinsed of what might limit it. Does literature of that level seem to you of special value as an interpreter and forecaster of human societal possibilities? Can you acquire something like that sense, of the height of literature, from criticism like Leavis' *The Great Tradition*, which takes away our breath, with its appropriateness to the standpoint of true art?

Who is Langland the Man as distinct from Langland the imaginer?

Little is known of Langland himself, as we have said. It seems probable that he was born in the [West Midlands](#) of [England](#) around 1330. The narrator of *Piers Plowman* receives his first vision while sleeping in the [Malvern Hills](#). The text of the poem contains a passage in which the narrator describes himself—later in life, obviously-- as a "loller" or "idler" living in the [Cornhill](#) area of [London](#), and refers to his wife and child. It also suggests that he was well above average height and made a living reciting prayers for the dead. However, the distinction between allegory and reality in the entire text of *Piers Plowman* is blurred, and the entire passage in question is reminiscent of the false confession tradition in [medieval literature](#). A passage in the final Passus of the B and C texts of *Piers Plowman* provides further ambiguous details on the poet's wife and his torments by Elde (Old Age), including baldness, [gout](#), and impotence. This may indicate that the poet had reached middle age by the 1370s, but the accuracy of the passage is called into question by the conventional nature of the description and the fact that it occurs near the end of the poem, when Will's personal development is reaching its logical conclusion. To the end of our acquaintance with his work, Langland remains as transitorily present as his characters, who blow in the wind of the mind.

Study guide

Particularly compelling, in the present poem, are certain recurring 'sates of affairs': the waking-dreaming-dreaming of dreaming-- sequences, which are Will's bridges of perception of the human turmoil he observes ahead of him in the daleful of people milling about, the human scene; the coming into presence of the two main avatars of Piers, as 'honest man,' and as transcendent Christ; the voice of Will/Piers proliferating sharp satirical passages against the corroded conditions of the time. This list of thematic linkings could be enriched—in fact with each new vision there is a new set of local conditions, to enframe the ongoing process of the poem. Given this interhatching of various themes or verbal positionings what seems to you to hold the poem together? Is it Will, the dreamer who calls the series of settings into existence? Is it the milling crowds who provide the global perspective—the kind of perspective Dante approaches his world with? Or is it Piers, who, for all his changeability—honest farmer into savior of the world, bitter satirist of corruption?—appears the directive sensibility of the whole, but only as he interacts with the extreme conditions of the human scene?

16 Julian of Norwich (1342- after 1416)

Book of Showings (A, 282-284)

The bare facts of the case

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? And who spends the greater part of her life immured in a small cell, with only a narrow window to give her access to food and the rare human voice. 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, her *Book of Showings*.

Accessibility

With William Langland, author of *Piers Plowman*, we asked whether we are able to access the religious allegorical style today, and whether the dream vision is a captivating literary form for us. We were of course raising the issue of reading mystical Christian literature in an age when narratives of other kinds may be more familiar or attractive to us. We tossed back and forth the possibilities of reaching beyond our familiar discourse to a relatively distant idiom and stage of our own language. We had to feel that, in the case of Langland, we had difficulty feeling at home with the tale he told, rather formal and stiff but purposeful—in the category, perhaps, of a centuries-later writer like John Bunyan, who also tends to win our hearts through a rather innocent genuineness. With Julian the problem is keener than with her contemporary Langland. 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 and nowness. Is she an innocent? Is *this a type of imagination which you are at home with? Do you "understand" it? Can you think yourself into this kind of vision?*

Mystical Territory

We are getting into mystical territory here, not just into the visionary realm Langland took us through in *Piers Plowman*. This is therefore the time, right at the beginning, 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. Being a mystic at a certain time means reflecting that time's tone and street sense in your mysticism. Does mysticism not take you 'out of time'? Perhaps it opens you to the finest essence of your time?

A literary parallel

Julian of Norwich writes her visions from the center of her time, though surely not without literary genius as shaper. You might want to study the filiations that join great literature with a kind of mysticism. You might want to look into the portrayal of religious states *in* literature, as distinct from the actuality of such states as literature (Julian's case.) Good case studies of mysticism as literature 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. In these figures of imagination, the mystical condition is realized. Let's see how Julian inscribes such ineffable feelings, as she finds or is them, in herself.

Mystical text

We can satisfy ourselves, in the case of Julian, by looking closely at a chapter from her *Revelations of Divine Love* (The Showings. Chapter V). She places us close to her soul, as she receives intimations of conversation from her Lord who is rising inside her.

In this same time our Lord shewed me a spiritual^[1] sight of His homely loving. I saw that He is to us everything that is good and comfortable for us: He is our clothing that for love wrappeth us, claspeth us, and all encloseth^[2] us for tender love, that He may never leave us; being to us all-thing that is good, as to mine understanding.

Also in this He shewed me a little thing, the quantity of an hazel-nut, in the palm of my hand; and it was as round as a ball. I looked thereupon with the eye of my understanding, and thought: What may this be? And it was answered generally thus: it is all that is made. I marveled how it might last, for methought it might suddenly have fallen to naught for little[ness]. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasteth, and ever shall [last] for that 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 verily the Maker, the Keeper, and the Lover,—I cannot tell; for till I am Substantially oned^[3] to Him, I may never have full rest nor very bliss: that is to say, till I be so fastened to Him, that there is right nought that is made betwixt my God and me.

It needeth us to have knowing of the littleness of creatures and to hold as nought^[4] all-thing that is made, for to love and have God that is unmade. For this is the cause why we be not all in ease of heart and soul: that we seek here rest in those things that are so little, wherein is no rest, and know not our God that is All-mighty, All-wise, All-good. For He is the Very Rest. God willeth to be known, and it pleaseth Him that we rest in Him; for all that is beneath Him sufficeth not us. And this is the cause why that no soul is rested till it is made nought as to all^[5] things that are made. When it is willingly made nought, for love, to have Him that is all, then is it able to receive spiritual rest.

Also our Lord God shewed that it is full great pleasance to Him that a helpless soul come to Him simply and plainly and homely. For this is the natural yearnings of the soul, by the touching of the Holy Ghost (as by the understanding that I have in this Shewing): God, of Thy Goodness, give me Thyself: for Thou art enough to me, and I may nothing ask that is less that may be full worship to Thee; and if I ask anything that is less, ever me wanteth,—but only in Thee I have all.

And these words are full lovely to the soul, and full near touch they the will of God and His Goodness. For His Goodness comprehendeth all His creatures and all His blessed works, and overpasseth^[6] without end. For He is the endlessness, and He hath made us only to Himself, and restored us by His blessed Passion, and keepeth us in His blessed love; and all this of His Goodness . "ghostly," and so, generally, throughout the MS.

Inside this mystical text: A Commentary.

Julian guides us through contemplation of a humble object, the hazelnut. What strikes us, as characteristic of her thinking, is its muscularity. The Lord's 'homely loving' shows up in the simplicity by which it displays its thereness. 'He shewed me a little thing,' she proceeds, declaring simply that a small hazelnut is there in her hand. She looks at it, 'with the eye of her understanding.' From simply holding the object she allows her understanding to penetrate it. That penetration enables her to ask herself 'what may this be'? (In other words the hazelnut's otherness suffices to raise the question of what it is. The succession of conditions of awareness is en marche.) The answer to Julian's question is that it, the hazelnut, is "all that is made." If so, how will it last? Mustn't what is made fall out of existence? She answers herself that because God loves the hazelnut it cannot fall out of existence. (The ensuing dialogue is with herself, answering her own questions.) 'And so all thing hath the being through the love of God.' God as Maker, Keeper, and Lover is forever separated from me, so that by the amount of that separation I can never be at rest. will only be at peace if there is no making separating me from God. Our end is to rest in God.

From the amazement of something that exists by God's making, that is simply present, to our awareness of God's love, manifest in his making, to our sense of the fraught distance that separates us from our creator, Julian drives a muscular path of self-posed questions and charged responses.

17. The Mabinogion. 1350-1410

The Setting

The *Mabinogion* is a series of eleven tales drawn from mediaeval Welsh folklore, history, and mythology. The writing down of this originally oral material, which may itself root in the early centuries after the birth of Christ, was accomplished by the fourteenth century—the incremental stages by which a whole was being constructed from this material, are a complex tale in themselves. (We know that the tales we have, here, have largely come down to us through two mediaeval Welsh manuscripts, the White Book of Rhyddereh, 1350, and the Red Book of Hergest, 1382-1410.) Beyond that point, however, we are short of provable fact, and might think, as a larger frame in which to lodge the texts of the *Mabinogion*, here of the murkiness surrounding the construction of *Beowulf*, from the obscure depths of early Anglo- Saxon culture and language.

The Mabinogion and Medieval Texts

With that, of course, would come an end to the comparison of these two early English literary achievements, for their purports differ greatly, as does the direction of another mediaeval epic, like the *Nibelungenlied*. Where the *Nibelungenlied* dug into the dark recesses of tribal romance, revenge, and power, and Beowulf into the equally dark, but in fact quite Christlike interventions of a mystery hero, the tales of the *Mabinogion* are a more diffuse collection, far less epic in intention—though the importance of Arthur's court contributes a consistent grandeur of scope—and in some ways similar to a sizeable collection of impressionistic archaic poems and short stories.

A sampling of texts

Taliesin

The heroic bardic tradition of Welsh literature meets us from the depths of time, and represents itself best in its archetypal bard, Taliesin. (We are dealing with a tribal/familial society at this point, one in which culture specialists—jurists, poets, soldiers—lived as distinct elements in the society. The primal bard—whether he is 'actual' or socially conjectural—is the figure of Taliesin. He speaks with the royal tone of the master poet, the figure who named the world before all time.)

Primary chief bard am I to Elphin,

And my original country is the region of the summer stars; Idno and Heinin called me Merddin. At length every king will call me Taliesin. I was with my Lord in the highest sphere. On the fall of Lucifer into the depth of hell I have borne a banner before Alexander south; I have been on the galaxy at the throne of the Distributor;

I was in Canaan when Absalom was slain;

I conveyed the Divine Spirit to the level of the vale of Hebron; I was in the court of Don before the birth of Gwydion.

I was instructor to Eli and Enoc;

I have been winged by the genius of the splendid crosier; I have been loquacious prior to being gifted with speech;

I was at the place of the crucifixion of the merciful Son of God; I have been three periods in the prison of Arianrod;

I have been the chief director of the work of the tower of Nimrod; I am a wonder whose origin is not known. I have been in Asia with Noah in the ark, I have seen the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; I have been in India when Rome was built, I am now come here to the remnant of Troia. I have been with my Lord in the manger of the ass: I strengthened Moses through the water of Jordan; I have been in the firmament with Mary Magdalene; obtained the muse from the cauldron of Caridwen; I have been bard of the harp to Lleon of Lochlin. I have been on the White Hill, in the court of Cynvelyn, for a day and a year in stocks and fetters; I have suffered hunger for the Son of the Virgin, I have been fostered in the land of the Deity.

I have been teacher to all intelligences,

I am able to instruct the whole universe.

I shall be until the day of doom on the face of the earth; And it is not known whether my body is flesh or fish. Then I was for nine months In the womb of the hag Caridwen; I was originally little Gwion, And at length I am Taliesin."

'I was at the place of the crucifixion of the merciful Son of God.' The text of this poetry is rich in Christian indications, including ample references to the Bible--Noah in the Ark, the Death of Abraham, Sodom and Gomorah—blended with primal Celtic mythology—Don, Gwydion, Eli, Merddin—into which the universality of the poetic spirit is vividly jammed.' I have been in Asia with Noah in the Ark.' Taliesin gathers to himself the primal traits of the creative consciousness, is Everyman, has been Everywhere. Although we are in the dark about the dating of writing, in early Celtic literature, we think that Taliesin's use of language is originally oral, though like other Welsh literature was written down later in the first

millennium. (Robert Graves, the British novelist and poet, writes in *The White Goddess* of the archetypal fusing of oral and written, pagan and Christian, in early Celtic literatures.

The Dream of Maxem Wledig

Ground zero for *Mabinogion* tales is already at the point where language is myth. The poetic spirit dominates all of Welsh culture; one can reference the example of the Eisteddfod, the national poetic competition, cultural summons social formative which has occurred annually—with rare and unavoidable breaks—since early Celtic times, and which sustains the highest classical standards of formal metric. It was in the climate of such a uniquely poetic culture that the tales of the *Mabinogion* unfolded.

The Dream of Maxem Wledig is an example of poetic language turning on itself as it struggles to carve out a prose narrative. The story is convoluted. Maxem is the Emperor of Rome—a pure fiction, alerting the listener/reader to the texture of the work—and he has a dream, in which he is transported to ‘the highest mountain in the world, high as the sky,’ on the far side of which it seems he found himself on level ground, and eventually descended to the mouths of ‘the largest river ever seen.’ Clearly, we are moving in territory the Greek poet Cavafis calls ‘myth-history,’ a formative dreamland in which miracles will be noted, and directions sought. Maxem came to the ‘fairest island in the world,’ and not long after to ‘the fairest castle in the world.’ After passing glidingly past handsome young men playing chess, he comes upon a maiden who is ‘the fairest sight that man ever beheld.’ And at that point the dreaming Emperor wakes up. Our tonality level shifts back to the everyday. Except that the haunting image of the maiden, whom he had begun to embrace, follows him into the daily, and haunts him.

A cheeky but honest page informs Maxem that his people have started to revile him, because he now ignores them and their needs—he thinks only of the maiden. A delegation of wise men suggests he send a delegation of messengers to seek for the maiden. They have no luck, but on a second try Maxem repeats his initial path, and this time finds not only the wonderful castle but the beautiful maiden. Maxem, as entranced as before, addresses the beauty and presents her with two alternatives: that she must go with them, and be made Empress of Rome, or receive an embassy, there in the castle, from the Emperor of Rome, who will take her as his wife. The messengers return at once to Rome, and inform the Emperor of the promise awaiting him. The Emperor returns, again overcoming multiple challenges of the road, and finds the maiden, whom he ‘makes his’ that night.

After a span of seven years, the limit to which a Roman Emperor could be absent from his throne, Maxem returns to his throne, reconquers his city and its lands, and confers on Rome the language and culture of the Britons, whom Maxem had originally conquered on the way to the magic Castle.

Conclusion

And so ends our second example tale. There are, in the *Mabinogion*, far more intricate and explanatory tales than the present. But it will suffice here to bring together the two tales we have sampled. In the former Taliesin reports on his preternatural construction from poetry. He is part of the primal poetic urge, so deep that it intersects with the mysterious tales that compose the Christian Holy Book, as well as with the power of nature in the creation of the world. Nothing less than such a power could have led the Emperor Wledig into the dream that draws him, that comes to direct and color his entire life, and that finds him the most splendid woman in the world. Dream, and the mysterious world that springs from the innerworld of the self, is where Taliessin draws his own powers into the world of language.

Study guide

In early Welsh society the poet—like the jurist or the military person—was viewed as a specialist, and required both special training and valid credentials, in order to practice his trade. This situation in itself

differs sharply from the situation today. Today the poet does not need to prove his worth before receiving permission to practice his trade. (Public opinion plays some role in checking unbridled self-confidence, among poetasters, and yet the popularity of 'poetry slams' proves that the public as a whole approves of the writing or speaking of poetry, of whatever quality, as a good thing.)

Maxem Wledeg is an Emperor who falls into dream, and acts out his wishes. What is the author trying to say about dream? That it is a pathway to the truth, or that it can be a dangerous illusion? Does Maxem finally discover his happiness? Has dream been a reliable lodestar?

18 Geoffrey Chaucer 1367-1434 *Canterbury Tales* 1392

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. This literary device is plainly making active use of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which

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?

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 3rdcent. 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).

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).

Works

The Book of the Duchess 1369
The House of Fame 1370
Parlement of Foules 1381
Troilus and Criseyde 1380
Translation of Boethius, Consolation 1380's
The Canterbury Tales 1387-1400

Biography

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; practice in life studies which would pay off richly in the *Canterbury Tales*, and in the human studies in *Troilus and Criseyde*. When he was ready for a career his father got him a job as a page at court, an apprenticeship which taught him a lot about the world, and from there Chaucer stepped into a long life of business and diplomacy.

For a while he studied law at the Inns of Court. He was active on the continent, in various military capacities, including some hush hush message carrying for the King. In company with various royal personages, Chaucer traveled widely on the continent. He went on to form many fruitful personal connections, while still a young man, and to observe life in its pageantry, especially as it played out into the separation among the three dominant classes both of continental and of English society: the nobility, the church and the commoners. (His eye for class differences was sharp.)

Chaucer married in 1360, had three or four children, and settled down to a life of business. For some time he served as Comptroller of Customs for the port of London, a job in which, we can be sure, he had ample opportunity to observe human nature at work. (These work challenges were also training in time management, understanding of logic and structure, and self-discipline.) His last prominent career work assignment was as Clerk of the King's works, a role in which he served as an administrator of buildings and works for the Royal Domain. From 1387 to the time of his death, Chaucer was also spending quality time on his masterwork, *The Canterbury Tales*.

Achievements

The Canterbury Tales, which draws on the broad experience of humanity, is a long poem considered by most critics to be Chaucer's greatest work, and though it is in many ways devoted to universal issues, lasting personality types which might well have been plucked from the ancient character repertoires of Theophrastus, it is also a work of great innovation.

The Canterbury Tales consists of a General Prologue and twenty-four stories told by pilgrims making their way as a group to Canterbury. The conception and execution of this great work was carried out by Chaucer during the last ten or twelve years of his life, and comes before us as a testimony to his powerful fictional transformation, of the human meaning of what was in fact an annual pilgrimage to the Cathedral of Thomas a Beckett, the Cathedral in which the archbishop had been murdered. The idea of introducing an Inn, along the route leading to the Cathedral, was the literary framework genius that gave Chaucer a mental stage on which to place his vivid picture of the human life of his time. Of similar brilliance was the idea—in itself totally improbable—of bringing together in one place, an Inn, a widely diverse set of social classes and background experiences. Chaucer's achievement was to match his transformative vision with a technical device, the trip to an inn, which brought a new image of the world into perspective.

As you read this text 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? Can you observe that Chaucer's achievement includes his ability to think from within the minds of his social types?

There is some wholistic drive, in Chaucer, to see his whole society as a unit. The interhatching of 'modern' concerns with old-fashioned values can be disengaged from all Chaucer's major characters, generated as they are from an urbane business oriented 14th century Londoner, who was at the same time an imaginative antiquary, constantly probing ways of giving fresh life to the historical past. The Wife of Bath, the Miller, Nicholas and the Pardoner all reflect that kind of genesis. Each of these characters

sports newsworthy and perfectly modern faults: the Wife a casual search for pleasure (and or money) in the course of acquiring and discarding mates; the Miller a heavy handed thief on the grain trade; Nicholas a spirited and lusty lady's man, indifferent to the deception and humiliation he dispenses en route to the main goal; the Pardoner a seller of fake gewgaws, a slick con man, though at the same time a purveyor of wise sayings about moral integrity. The old-fashioned in each of these characters is in their exemplary natures—the way each of them 'stands for' a bundle of traits, the Wife for the polyandrous, the Miller for the fraudulent, Nicholas for the city slicker swain, and the pardoner for the eternal con man. The final drive of this great work probably transcends even the powerful desire to see society as a whole. Like Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tale* srechases for a comprehensive grasp of the entire human condition—not one under God, as in Dante, but one, and throbbing with life. Sociologist before his time, Chaucer reaches into new dimensions of characterization, getting inside the minds of real people in their social setting. This too is a way to describe his achievement, bringing a new image of the world into perception.

In the mid 1380's, *while The Canterbury Tales* were cooking in Chaucer's mind, he created an epic poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*, which many readers have found finer and more complete--the original plan of the *Canterbury Tales* was never completed—than the *Canterbury Tales*. This epic, in *rime royale*, took much inspiration from the contemporary Italian poet, Boccaccio, but struck its own original and powerful note. The core of the epic is the passion and conflict of sexual desire, between two young lovers, Troilus and Criseyde. Unlike the comparable ancient tale, of Hero and Leander who long for each other across the Bosphorus, and ultimately perish, Chaucer's twist on ancient myth is bitter, if also a bit detached. It is this tone which sets Chaucer's stamp on the work, gives it that 'realistic' force we treasure in *The Canterbury Tales*. In the end Criseyde welches out on the solemn love she has sworn to Troilus, and leaves the Trojan camp. She returns to her father, the prophet Calchas, in the Greek camp, and falls head over heels in love with the Greek hero Diomedes. So much for the tricks of Cupid, and the vulnerability of Troilus, which is rendered here with touching depth.

19 Margery Kempe. 1373-1438 *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1432—the year of Margery's final efforts to get her book written down; the only surviving ms. of this book came to light in 1934).

The present entry was first completed by **Robert Sayre**; after his death the original work was slightly modified and reshaped by Frederic Will.

The Intimate Setting

Understandably the mind of the mystic—we have looked into that dark generative center in discussing Meister Eckhart and Julian of Norwich--is a refuge of intimacy penetrable only from the inside. As we step back into the creative workshops of literary making, in Greco-Roman literatures, we rarely feel we are entering the hidden center of the person, where the intimate is being exposed. If we think of ancient Greek literature, for example, we find little insight into the private center of making. We can turn to the lyric, which by the sixth century—in Archilochos or Sappho—has become a fine tuned instrument of feelings, and yet both the bravoura of the former, and the charged passion of the latter writer are formalized, both by metrical strictures and by feelings which strike us as fore-readied by social settings. What we need to say, about the lyric mind of Greece—or of Rome, in Ovid and Propertius—is that its genius is that of wonderful craft more than of unique intimacy. It will be Plato who masters the art of turning the dialogue inside out, and creating a home for the ineffable; it will be minds like those of Marcus Aurelius or Saint Augustine who let us into an intimate conversation in which we find ourselves wooed into opening, and going where only the intimate of us is left. Saint or General, it seems that with these two late antique minds we are launched on a new road of inteority. It is a road Christianity will soon contribute to opening, wih its positing of heart-intimacy at the center of global meaning, but it is also a road which will later make findable such central byways as the novel, the memoir, the confessional in literature and the arts. For better or for worse we are, in the unfolding of these now familiar genres, making our ways into modernity.

Margery Kempe: The shape of her mind and life

Birth

Margery Kempe belongs to the sequence of distinguished mystics who season the entire texture of mediaeval culture—from Meister Eckhart to Julian of Norwich to the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* in the latter half of the 14th century. Kempe was born in Bishop's Lynn (now King's Lynn), a small but busy seaport at the mouth of the River Ouse on the east coast of England, about half way between London, in the south, and York, in the north, probably in 1373.

Family background

Margery Kempe's father was John Brunham, a prosperous merchant who also served as mayor and a member of Parliament. At age 20, she married John Kempe, also a merchant; she was en route to a respectable middle class life. Despite her social status, however, she like other women of her time never learned to write. (They were regularly subject to the time's prejudices about the inferiority of women and their judgment; were forbidden to preach, etc.) As a result, she had to dictate her story to amanuenses, speaking at different times to different ones, a procedure which makes her narrative hard to follow. There are no dates assigned to her texts, and the chronology is often uncertain. The fact that only one original manuscript of her work remains, reminds us of what a slender thread joins her and her visions to our knowledge.

Distinctive autobiography

The complete manuscript of Margery Kempe's book, which was copied by a second scribe at a later date, after her death, was not found until 1934, in the library of a family living in Pleasington Hall, an estate in Lancashire. But since then it has been widely praised for its unusual insight into medieval English life and religion—especially into the issues of religious devotion. Her book is also a story with which many modern feminists identify. (She had 14 children, had difficulty reconciling her and her husband's sexual desire with her religious calling to celibacy; she tried to establish careers as a brewer and a miller, and was occasionally arrested and imprisoned for what was believed to be her religious fanaticism and other unusual behavior—and which was certainly made public by her fits of weeping in church and on the street.) Apart from her public religious emotions, Margery was a distinctively in your face public figure, widely seen and known. She also traveled widely throughout her life—in England, Europe, and to Jerusalem and the Holy Land—giving the world at large an opportunity to wrestle with her raucous spirituality.

For all its interest and striking modernity, however, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, as the manuscript was called, is not an easy read. Margery Kempe's language was Middle English, the language of Geoffrey Chaucer, whose dates, 1343-1400, make him a fairly close contemporary. Thus, though we read Margery Kempe in translation—the passage cited below, at the end of this entry, is left in Middle English, to whet our appetites for the still available early tenors of our language—the grammar and word order are unfamiliar, and the vocabulary is often mystifying. There are archaic words like "grutching" (complaining and accusing) and "houselled" (to serve the eucharist to). There are also common words whose meanings have changed. To Kempe, for example, "dalliance" and "dally," for example, did not mean sexual play or *to loaf and delay*, but *intimate and informal talk*. For other words the patient reader should be able to make out the original by using The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED).

The historical context of Kempe and her book: charges of Lollardism and heresy.

Margery Kempe lived over a century before the Protestant Reformation. England was still a firmly Catholic country and the church was male-gender hierarchical—as it tends to remain to our day. Nevertheless, there were some portents of religious change. John Wycliffe (1328-84), a professor at Oxford, had translated the New Testament into English, believing that its stories and teachings should be available to ordinary people rather than only to scholars and priests. He also believed that priests should be poor and associate with common people, like the disciples and early Christians. Wycliffe's followers

were called “Lollards,” a name derived from the Dutch word for mutterers and mumblers, and thus heretics. Kempe was often accused of “Lollardism,” though she denied it. She seems to have been proud of her social status and, after all, she could not read Latin or English.

Her visions and seizures

It is understandable that Margery Kempe’s repeated weeping and crying and belief in her personal visitations from Jesus, Mary, and the “ghostly father” were easily associated with the Lollards’ mumblings and radical views. She made no secret of the visions to which she was regularly subject, and in which Jesus spoke often and intimately with her. In a characteristic passage she reported that Jesus had sat beside her on her bed and asked her ‘why have you deserted me, when I have never deserted you?’ It was widely understood that from the time of her first childbirth, Margery had been subject to psychotic episodes, in which demons and other diabolical figures had tortured her dreams, and enforced her public acting out.

The gender and sexuality scene

The sexual stereotypes of Kempe’s time were a mixture of Biblical teachings and medical lore. Women, it was believed, were less rational than men and more moved by their emotions and sexual desire. An illustration is Chaucer’s lusty Wife of Bath, in his *Canterbury Tales*, who has had five husbands and says that a woman’s secret goal is to dominate men. They dominate by attracting men physically and then procuring their sperm as a source of greater reason and strength. Consequently, men must control women and women must obey their fathers and husbands and their priests. St. Paul’s rule that women should not preach was universally accepted. It was common belief that women were to submit to their husbands sexually, and yet also a religious teaching that chastity was morally superior – a contradiction that underlies Margery’s conflicts with her husband John. At first she says that “the debt of matrimony was so abominable to her that she would rather...have eaten or drunk the ooze and muck of the gutter.’ At other times, however, she returns to the marital bed. Ultimately she establishes a contract with her husband, agreeing to sleep with him but without intercourse. And yet, even at that, one sees that she was a productive mother.

A sample from the Book

A schort tretys of a creature sett in grett pompe and pride of the world, whеч sythen was drawyn to ower Lord be gret poverté, sekenes, schamis, and gret reprevys in many divers contres and places, of whеч tribulacyons sum schal ben schewed aftyr, not in ordyr as it fellyn but as the creatur coud han mend of hem whan it wer wretyn, for it was twenty yer and mor fro tym this creatur had forsake the world and nbesyly clef onto ower Lord or this boke was wretyn, notwythstandyng this creatur had gret counsel for to don wryten hir tribulacyons and hir felingys, and a Whyte Frer proferyd hir to wryten frely yf sche wold. And sche was warnyd in hyr spyrit that sche schuld not wryte so sone. And many yerys aftyr sche was body in hyr spyrit for to wrytyn.

What themes do we touch in this passage? The inception of the writing down, and the time and experience that Margery devoted to her testament. Margery’s debt to the White Friar who has carried out the writing down for her. Margery’s reference to herself as a ‘creature,’ limited by ‘pomp and pride,’ who for all her weakness feels drawn to her Lord, and feels an obligation to humanity to record her ‘tribulations.’

Study guides

Today, it seems, we would refer to Margery’s severe difficulty, with her first pregnancy, as a case of post partem depression or perhaps as a psychotic episode. Margery’s behavior was from that time forward prone to episodes of acting out. Public outbursts—especially in Church—of religious emotion, in which

she would speak with Jesus, or other of the 'divine figures' of Christian faith. Her intimacy with Jesus inspired her, often in public, to talk with her savior, carrying out a complete dialogue. How do you interpret this kind of public religious outcry? Do you understand why Margery was suspected of heresy, and on several occasions arrested and threatened with imprisonment? How would we deal with her today?

Margery Kempe was not only a religiously conspicuous individual, but she was at the same time, in many ways, a middle class housewife. She had an active libido, so powerful that God finally authorized a slowdown for the marital bed, and produced fourteen children. She participated in various lengthy pilgrimages, an admirable social achievement, and—as we see in the Middle English passage cited above—she had a decorously critical view of herself, calling herself a 'poor creature, limited by pomp and pride.' She occupies a social role as the wife of the mayor of Norwich, she undertakes businesses (a mill, a brewery), and she regularly wears a 'hair shirt,' or 'hair cloth,' to assure her self-discipline. Was there not, then, more than one pronounced side to Margery, a post-hysterical religious ideology, and a disciplined, businesslike middle class housewife? Was she a good citizen of Norwich, or a hyperventilating loose cannon?