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Part I

Old and Middle English Periods (450-1485) [1]

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1. There are different division years in different literary histories. Here, the year 450 is the year around which Angles, Saxons and Jutes came to drive the Celts away; and we follow the *Norton Anthology* in choosing 1485 as the end year of the Middle English Period.

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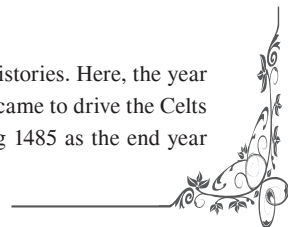
Chapter 1

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$\mathcal{O}$ ld English Period and *Beowulf*
<div align="right">(450-1066)</div>

I. Old English Period

1. A Brief Account of the Historical Situation

In about BC 600 Celts, who inhabited the upper Rhineland, started to migrate to the British Isles, and among them the Britons, a branch of the Celts, came to the Isles in BC 400 to BC 300, from whom Britain got its name. At the time of migration, the Celtics were tribal people at the early stage of the Iron Age. Later, troops led by Julius Caesar of the Roman Empire invaded the British Isles, defeated the Celts and ruled there from BC 55 to AD 407, bringing with them the slave system. The Roman reign over Britain went on for four and a half centuries, but the Britons never ceased fighting against them. At the beginning of the 5th century, the Roman Empire declined and in AD 410 all their troops were withdrawn. The Romans had built towns, roads, walls, and military fortresses during their rule, but because they did not really settle down or mix up with the Celts, they left little influence on the native people.

After the Romans, the Teutonic or Germanic tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes moved to live in the British Isles. This happened in about AD 450. They drove the Celts to Wales, Scotland and Ireland, settled down themselves and named the central part of the island England, that is the land of Angles. These tribes were a seafaring people who originally lived along the coast of Denmark and Germany. They became the masters of England and the ancestors of the English people. By the end of the 6th century there had been established seven Saxon kingdoms in England, and a feudal society gradually replaced the primitive tribal life.

In the modern English language, almost no traces of the Celtic language

of the ancient Britons can be found. Despite the fact that in the course of its development the English language has gradually changed, such as the loss of most of the flexions of the old Anglo-Saxon, both the grammatical rules and the body of the short words that forms the basic word-stock of Modern English are of Anglo-Saxon origin.

Starting from the late 8th century, the Danes from Scandinavia came plundering the Isles. They were a strong sea people known as the Vikings and at first they mainly invaded the eastern coast of England. But soon they pushed inland to plunder the whole country. It was in the second half of the 9th century and united under the Wessex King, Alfred the Great (849-c. 899), that the English people drove the Viking Danes off. King Alfred also made contributions other than military. He encouraged education and literature. The first Anglo-Saxon chronicle was written during his reign, which was a landmark of the Old English Period. After his death, the Danes overcame the Saxons again in 1013. It was not until 23 years later in early 11th century that the pirating of the Vikings was finally brought to a stop. Although some Danes made permanent settlements in the British Isles, yet like the Romans before them, they failed to leave much influence behind.

The greatest historical event that followed was the Norman Conquest of 1066. The Normans came from Normandy in northern France to attack England and won a decisive victory at the battle of Hastings under the leadership of the Duke of Normandy, usually known as William the Conqueror. William then claimed the English throne, promising the last Saxon king Harold that he would protect England from the Vikings' invasions. France at that time was more advanced in the social system and economy. The Norman Conquest not only hurried England toward a more developed feudal society, but its influence in the evolution of the English language, life style and culture was also very significant. The year 1066 was then marked as a dividing point in the English history. Although the Norman rulers spoke French, English survived. In 1349 English was officially introduced in schools and in 1362 in courts of law. And gradually the English language entered a new period of its history, which is known as the Middle English.

Before finishing this brief historical account, we must also say something about the beginning of Christianity in Britain. Both the earliest Celtic settlers and the Angles, Saxons and Jutes came to England as heathens. They worshipped their own gods that were related to the mythology of Northern Europe. It was in the year of 597 that Pope Gregory the Great of the

Roman Catholic Church sent St. Augustine to England to convert the Anglo-Saxons. King Ethelbert of Kent was the first to be converted and he founded in Kent the Canterbury Abbey. In the north, the earlier Christianised Ireland was engaged in sending missionaries to the Angles. The monasteries built by them in Northumbria were the earliest civilising influences, and the well-known Northumbrian School in literary history refers to the learned monks in these monasteries. From Canterbury and Northumbria, Christianity spread throughout the country. However, it took the Roman Catholic Church about a century to Christianise all England. More monasteries were set up and, like the situation in Europe, monks who were trained in Latin became the most learned people of England. The great Latinist of Northumbrian School was the Venerable Bede (c. 673-735), a learned theologian and historian with works such as a natural history and a chronology of the Christian era. His most outstanding work is *The Ecclesiastical History of the Angles*, which is still the chief authority for knowing the Old English Period, including its earliest poetry, poets and literary achievements.

2. Chief Literary Achievements of the Period

Old English Poetry: The earliest forms of English literature have perished. We know very little of the Old English poetry in its rudest shape. The first English poet known to us is Widsith, meaning the "Wide Wanderer", who was a scop or itinerant minstrel of the 6th century. Widsith left us a poem named after himself called *Widsith*, which is around 150 lines long about his own life, his joy and grief. Then there is a moving elegy *The Wanderer* of 115 lines, a lament of a man who has lost his protecting lord, and wanders afterwards over the waters to find a resting place. Another piece *The Seafarer* is usually read as a dialogue between an old man who knows the joyless life of the sea and a young man who will not be persuaded away from the sea adventures. There are other fragmentary poems such as *The Wife's Complaint* and *The Husband's Message*, etc. But the poor shape of the manuscript makes all of the poems difficult to read. *Beowulf* is the most readable and complete one of them. It tells the hard, joyless yet heroic lives of the old English forefathers, and is regarded as their great national epic poem.

Christian Poetry: Christian poetry occupies an important place in the literature of this period too. Augustine and the Roman monks who came to convert England changed much of the subject matter and feeling of English

A page of Old English verse

poetry, but left its form and artistic features unaltered. For instance, the subject changed from describing people's hard and melancholy life to the story of Christ and the deeds of saintly heroes, but the form of the verse line and the shape of the poem remain the same as those of *Beowulf*. Also, St. Augustine's theological influence stayed, but mainly in the south. In the north, the monasteries were sometimes headed by Celtic Christians, and thus northern English literature was touched by a Celtic influence, the effect of which was to make English poetry more subjective and lyric. Among the early Anglo-Saxon poets Caedmon (fl.670) from Northumbria must be mentioned. He grew up and lived in a monastery ruled by a Celtic Abbess and was remembered for his Christian poetry. According to him, he was told in a vision to sing of God. When he woke up, he remembered the lines and wrote them down. And this event started him on the road of composing poetry. He wrote in Anglo-Saxon a poetic paraphrase of the Bible. Another important poet who appeared a century later after Caedmon was Cynewulf (fl.750). He was the author of poems on religious subjects.

II. Anglo-Saxon Epic Poem *Beowulf*

The Anglo-Saxons came to England with their own folklore and their early poetry mostly tells of events which took place on the European Continent. After their settlement in England the tribal form of social life gave

way to the rising feudal system, which was accompanied by the consolidation of Christian faith that finally replaced the pagan beliefs in the 7th century. But even after Christianity was officially adopted by the ruling classes and Latin was taught in monastic schools, the common people continued to keep in their memory the songs and epics created by the ancient scops. And in this way some of the ancient Anglo-Saxon poetry were preserved. The written Anglo-Saxon later developed on the basis of the Latin alphabet and was practised by scribes and scholars who were often of "low birth". These monastery-trained writers knew Latin and were influenced by the Latin language and Christian culture. They recorded and passed down ancient poems of which *The Song of Beowulf* was the most important.

1. The Story of *Beowulf*

Part One: The story begins with a description of the reign of the Danish king Hrothgar who had built a great feast-hall Heorot to entertain his kinsmen and warriors. But the feasts attracted a huge sea-monster Grendel, who was a man-eater and lived in the neighbouring swamps. He regularly appeared in Heorot at night-time and ate some warriors. The hall was soon deserted. The news of the disaster reached Beowulf, Hrothgar's nephew and a young and mighty warrior of Geats (Jutes) who had won fame and respect everywhere for his bravery and self-sacrifice spirit. He immediately sailed forth with a small band of warriors to Denmark. Hrothgar welcomed them and gave a banquet. In the dead of the night the monster came and killed a warrior. Beowulf fought Grendel and caught the monster in an iron grip. Their fight was so fierce that the walls of the hall shook. At last Grendel tore himself away, but left his arm in Beowulf's hand. He escaped and crawled back to his lair to die.

The next night a great feast was thrown to celebrate Beowulf's victory. But Grendel's mother, a water-witch, came to avenge her son and killed one of the warriors. Beowulf and his warriors set out to the lair of Grendel's mother at the bottom of a stagnant pool full of sea-serpents and frothing with blood. Beowulf plunged into the pool. In the castle of Grendel's mother, he found a magic sword. With this powerful weapon he killed the old monster. Then he saw Grendel's dead body and cut off his head. Hrothgar heaped valuable gifts on the hero and his followers, but Beowulf brought his share of treasures back to Jutland (the land of Jutes) and gave all of it to Hygelac, his king.

Part Two: After Hygelac's death, Beowulf was elected king by the people of Jutland and ruled for fifty years, during which time his people enjoyed peace and prosperity. But at the end of these fifty years, a great disaster befell the country. A firedrake, who guarded a cave where an enormous treasure was hidden, found out that a traveler had stolen a jeweled cup when he was asleep. He then revenged himself by destroying and killing many of Beowulf's people. Beowulf, who was now very old, decided to go and fight the monster. He allowed only one young warrior, Wiglaf, to follow him to the cave. This dragon with three heads attacked Beowulf, belching forth fire and smoke. Their fight was terrible. Beowulf struck off two of the dragon's heads. The dragon swung his huge tail to strike at Beowulf while his last head breathed fire at the hero's face. Beowulf finally won with the help of Wiglaf, but he was seriously wounded and died. Wiglaf succeeded him to be the king.

According to Beowulf's will, the people of Jutland built a large bonfire and cremated his body. Then they laid all the treasures from the dragon's cave with Beowulf's ashes to show that gold could not compensate for their great loss.

2. The Artistic Features of *Beowulf*

The only existing manuscript of *The Song of Beowulf* was written by an unknown scribe at the beginning of the 10th century and was not discovered until 1705, though it was composed much earlier. It reflects events which took place on the Continent around the beginning of the 6th century when the Jutes lived in the Scandinavian peninsula and kept close relations with their kindred Danes. The poem is composed in the manner of the North-European Sagas and closely resembles the Scandinavian epics. The poem is essentially pagan in spirit and matter and its 3182 lines are divided into two parts with an interpolation between them, which was added to the poem by the Christian scribes who copied it. Although the spirits of two traditions, the heathen and the Christian, are both shown in this Anglo-Saxon poem, they are not contradictory, but mutually compensating. The pagan tradition emphasises the love of war, the virtues of courage and loyalty, and the necessity for feud. It also favours supernatural elements, like monsters and dragons, and the workings of fate. The Christian tradition, with its new morality, teaches obedience to God and the observance of His laws. Therefore, the latter helps to give the poem a good balance. As a result, the hero Beowulf possesses

Christ-like qualities as well as courage and physical strength of a superman. But, in fact, like all good literature, *Beowulf* deals with themes beyond any particular religious interests. It is a poem that tells the universal truth of good fighting against and triumphing over the evil.

The most noticeable artistic feature of *Beowulf* is alliteration. The poem is written in alliterative verse with a caesura in the middle and two stresses (or accents) in each half. The number of unstressed syllables in the two halves may vary. Yet, the same consonant is repeated at the beginning of the accented syllables, either twice in the first half of the verse line and once in the second half, or vice versa. Alliteration makes Anglo-Saxon poetry very musical in sound and acts almost the same part that rhyme plays in later poetry. English poets till today still love to use alliteration.

Another peculiar feature characteristic of Anglo-Saxon poetry is the frequent use of kennings, to poetically present the meaning of one single word through a compound simile of two elements. For examples, we find in *Beowulf* the sun is called "the world's great candle", sword is often substituted by "brain-biter" and "life-destroyer", and the word "harp" is named "wood-of-delight".

Finally, the general mood and spirit of Anglo-Saxon epic poetry is both solemn and animated, the movement of action or events vigorous, and the descriptions with kennings very picturesque and exact.

There are many other stylistic points to notice in *Beowulf* such as the use of similes, the elevated diction, and the great deal of variation in the style, especially through thesis and antithesis. We also find good use of balance and parallelism. But alliteration is no doubt the hallmark of the Anglo-Saxon poetry. The following is a passage, a translation from the Old English, describing how Grendel enters the Heorot at night.[1]

> Down off the moorlands' misting fells[2] came
> Grendel stalking; God's brand was on him.[3]
> The spoiler[4] meant to snatch away
> from the high hall some of human race.

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1. Because it is a translation, it does not show the regular adoption of alliteration and other features of the Old English verses. But we still can find some examples in this selected passage.
2. fell: hill
3. God's brand was on him: This is a metaphorical way of saying he was evil.
4. the spoiler: Grendel who came to rob and kill

He came on under the clouds, clearly saw at last[1]
the gold-hall of men, the mead[2]-drinking place
nailed with gold plates. That was not the first visit
he had paid to the hall of Hrothgar the Dane:
he never before and never after
harder luck nor hall-guards found.

Review Questions

1. Give an account of the history of England from the Celtic settlement to the Norman Conquest.
2. How did Christianity came to England? Name the most important monasteries of this period.
3. Name some representative pieces of the Old English poetry.
4. Name the two most important Christian poets of this period.
5. Analyse the artistic features of *Beowulf*, using the quoted passage to illustrate your points.

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1. Notice the alliteration formed by "came", "clouds" and "clearly". Another very obvious alliteration example is two verse lines taken from the *Seafarer*: "True is the tale (caesura) I tell of my travels, / Sing of my seafaring (caesura) sorrows and woes."
2. mead: a drink of alcohol mixed with honey

<div align="right">Chapter 2</div>

$\mathscr{M}$iddle English Period and Chaucer
<div align="right">(1066-1485)</div>

I. Middle English Period

1. A Brief Account of the Historical Situation

After 1066, the Anglo-Norman period began. The Normans, who came from the northern part of France, were in origin Scandinavian. They brought with them the French language, customs and culture to England, where they protected their feudal monarchy by a strong military power. William the Conqueror divided the land of England among his followers who became barons, while the defeated Anglo-Saxons worked as serfs and peasants for them and were cruelly exploited and oppressed. Besides the king and the lords, one third of the land in the country was owned by the Church. Also, Norman-French was made the official language of the state, while English was ignored. But there was no way to impose a foreign language upon a whole nation without wiping out the greater part of the population. The lowly people kept to English and gradually the invaders were assimilated. The English language survived, and became a richer and more mature language after absorbing a great many French words into its vocabulary. The most telling and often cited example of the French influence shown in the English vocabulary is the different words used for the farm animals and the meat they produce, such as pig and pork, sheep and mutton, and ox/cow and beef. The explanation is simple and interesting. Because the animals were raised by the serfs and peasants, they kept their Anglo-Saxon names, whereas the meat was brought to the table of the French lords and it was given a French name. Together with the change in vocabulary, it was also at this time that the English language lost most of its old Anglo-Saxon flexions.

In fact, the second half of the 14th century was very eventful. Great

changes took place in England's social, economic and cultural life. Peasants had to pay rent in service, grain or cash to the feudal lords and the Church who held most of the land. The yeomen were also deprived of their lands, and traders and handicraftsmen could not go on with their normal business. As a result, feudalism in England was on the verge of a serious crisis. John Ball (c. 1330-1381), a poor priest from Canterbury Abbey, spoke bravely in the interests of the common people. In his sermons John Ball preached equality, and the well-known couplet: "When Adam delved and Eve span, / Who was then the gentlemen?" was a brilliant example of protest against inequality, which summoned many people under the banner of the 1381 peasant uprising. A tile-maker Wat Tyler, who had served in the continental wars, led the peasant army and won many victories. Yet sadly, they directed their hatred chiefly at the barons and still placed hopes on the justice of the king. The peasants believed in the promises of Richard II, who was then only 15 years old and a puppet in the hands of the feudal lords. Naturally they were betrayed and Tyler was executed.

Besides the contradictions between the exploiting and the exploited classes, the feudal lords fought over power and land. When the conflicts grew sharper, a civil war called the War of the Roses (1455-1485) broke out between two big feudal houses, the House of York and the House of Lancaster, one wearing the red roses when fighting and the other the white. This war together with the Hundred Years War[1] (1337-1453) against France extinguished the greater part of England's ancient aristocratic families and paved the way for the growing towns to develop trade and commerce more quickly. According to Marx, the defeat of the French army at the battle of Agincourt (1415) rang the death-knell of feudalism.

After the wars, the English language went through a process of unification. London dialect became the basis of this new English, which linguists identify as Middle English. Not only its vocabulary was greatly enriched by words borrowed from French and Latin, but changes also took place in grammar and pronunciation. In fact, the forming process of the Middle English started as early as 1066, yet the Middle English as a period began from the middle of the 13th century.

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1. The "Hundred Years War" is spelt as the "Hundred Years' War" in some textbooks. We decide on the one without apostrophe after the word "years" according to the 3rd edition of the *Columbia Encyclopedia* (1963).

A page of Middle English verse

2. Chief Literary Achievements of the Period

Romances: The Anglo-Norman Period saw the flourishing of feudal culture. While the ruling classes chose their own literary trends and forms and invented new poetical devices, the common people preserved their national traditions and continued to develop them in the forms of popular songs and ballads. Trouvers, who came from France with Normans, brought romance to England. It was the most prevalent literary genre in feudal Europe and in England, which were written for the nobles and told their stories. The poets who composed them were mostly patronised by the rich and the powerful.

In an attempt to justify their claims to England, the Norman lords tried to prove that they were lawful heirs of the Britons. Therefore, to dig out the ancient Celtic folklore and develop romantic stories out of it became very popular under the Norman reign. The early English romances were composed in rhymed verse, and the language used was Norman-French. But at the beginning of the 13th century, minstrels and chroniclers started to

write romances in Old English. Although romances are tales of adventures of knights, or legendary heroes of the ancient times to celebrate their heroism, courage, uprightness and other virtues, and to serve the purpose of strengthening the feudal system, yet minstrels who wrote and spread them were often from the common stock. When traveling from place to place, they spent a lot of time with ordinary people, and as a result they usually depicted poor peasants and townsfolk in the stories with sympathy and warmth.

Romances can be divided according to their subjects into three groups: Matter of France, e.g. the romance about a French national hero called *Chanson de Roland*; Matter of Rome, e.g. romances telling about Alexander the Great or the siege of Troy; and Matter of Britain, e.g. the Arthurian cycle which has its origin in the Celtic legends and consists of adventures of King Arthur and his Round-Table Knights, such as Sir Gawain and Launcelot, Merlin the Magician, the quest of the Holy Grail, etc.

King Arthur was from real history. He was the national hero of the Celts. In the romances he is shown as an ideal king, who has many faithful knights or vassals to serve him. Through the Arthurian cycle the English people tried to prove that the founder of Britain was related in blood to the ancient Roman nobilities, so that England could secure a place of honour among European nations. One of its most well-known stories is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a piece written in about 1375-1400 by an unknown poet. Sir Gawain, one of King Arthur's Round-Table Knights, took up a green knight's challenge at the king's New Year celebration party, and went into a series of adventures, during which he met with dangers, overcame difficulties, and also learned moral lessons. The poem reflects principles of knighthood, such as courage, fidelity, chastity and dedication to the church, etc. Another important piece of Arthurian tales is Thomas Malory's (c. 1405-1471) *Mort d'Arthur*, which was composed much later in English prose.

Other Literary Productions: In addition to romances, the time saw a variety of other literary productions too. Take the poetic genres for example. There were hymns, legends and visions. Among the dramatic genres we find mysteries, miracles and morality plays. What is more, devoted to moral teachings, the church writers at the time mostly turned to allegories. However, some bold, independent thinkers used religious matters to convey their free thought to the people. John Ball, John Wyclif (c. 1320-1384) and William Langland (c. 1332-1400) were such writers. John Ball, as we've

shown previously in this chapter, was mainly remembered for his preaching of equality. Wyclif translated the Bible into English against the rules of the church to benefit the common people. His translation was a great contribution and many later translations consulted his version. In his allegorical poem *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, a poem in the form of dream vision of more than 7,000 lines, Langland protests against feudal tyranny and criticises the corruption of the church. The protagonist Piers (i.e. Peter) represents the common people and is depicted with sympathy and admiration. Langland glorifies labor and points out that all people must work.

Ballads: Besides works of poets, people never ceased to create tales and songs in their own manner. New kinds of songs in the form of popular ballads that contain both narrative and lyrical elements appeared in the 14th century. One of the characteristic features of ballads is the dramatic development of its plot, with vivid episodes following one another. There are both narrative and lyrical components, brief dialogues and expressive descriptions. Repetition is adopted to help form the unity of a ballad, and alliteration suggests the links of ballads with the Anglo-Saxon epic tradition. Ballads have a variety of themes, such as the struggle of young lovers against their parents, the border wars between England and Scotland, class oppression and conflicts, and so on. Ballads can also be grouped according to their sub-genres, such as historical, legendary, fantastical, lyrical and humourous. In the numerous "border ballads" the age-long struggles of the Scots and the English are told. Among all the English ballads, the ballads of Robin Hood must have our special attention.

Robin Hood and his friend Little John lived during the reign of King Richard the Lion-Heart. Robin was born a Saxon. He was forced to rebel and became a robber and outlaw, but he only robbed the rich and often helped the poor and the needy. Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Scott, Keats, etc. all mentioned Robin Hood in their works. The Robin Hood ballads were united into a cycle at the beginning of the 16th century, called *A Merry Geste*[1] *of Robin Hood*, in which the hero's whole life is portrayed. The character of Robin Hood is richly depicted. He is strong, brave and clever with a tender heart and a sense of humour. He hates the cruel oppressors and loves the poor and the downtrodden. Robin Hood's friends include the seven-feet-tall Little John, Midge the Miller's Son, the Jolly Friar Tuck and many others. All of

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1. Geste: deed, exploit

them are vividly drawn. Other well-liked ballads are *Sir Patrick Spens, The Wife of Usher's Well, The Three Ravens, Get up and Bar the Door*, etc.

II. Geoffrey Chaucer

1. His Life & Literary Career

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343-1400), a great narrative poet, is thought of as "Father of English Poetry". He was born in a well-to-do wine merchant's family in London and studied at Oxford and Cambridge. Afterwards he became a page boy to a countess and came into close contact with the court. In 1359 he joined in the Hundred Years War and went with the English army to France, and in 1367 he began to serve in the government. King Edward III sent him on several diplomatic trips to

Geoffrey Chaucer

Europe and stayed for some time in France and Italy. In 1373 Chaucer took the post of Controller of Customs in the port of London. He worked during the day and in the evening he wrote poems. In 1386 he was elected member of Parliament, but lost that post soon, due to the maneuvers of his enemies. He had some difficult time, but in 1389 he was made Clerk of the King's Works at Westminster and Windsor, and Edward's successor Henry IV issued him a pension. After Chaucer died, he was buried in the Westminster Abbey. The place where he was put later became the famous Poets' Corner.

Chaucer's creative work reflects the changes which had taken place in English culture since the second half of the 14th century, a time when the foundation of the feudal system was challenged by people's insurrections like the 1381 peasant uprising. In religion, the glory of the Catholic Church was also on the wane. Chaucer's creative career is usually divided into three phases:

a) The phase of French influence, in which he did translations from French authors, e.g. the famous *Romance of the Rose*, and experimented with rhythm and structure though mostly following the conventional images and ideas. He favoured and wrote allegorical visions and satires in the manner of the Middle Ages. The most significant work of this period is *The Book of Duchess* (1370), an elegy in which Chaucer uses the vision in a dream as his vehicle to lament the death of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, and to console

her husband and Chaucer's patron, John of Gaunt, the Duke. In the poem Chaucer pretends to dream about a man in black, who is lost in grief. Chaucer makes the man tell the reasons of his grief and in this way helps him to come out of sorrow.

b) The phase of Italian influence, in which he showed an effort to learn from the Italian great poets such as Dante. But the Italian poet who influenced him most is Boccaccio, the author of *Decameron. The House of Fame, The Parliament of Fowls* and *Troilus and Criseyde* (c. 1385) are poems of this phase. Among them, *Troilus and Criseyde* is the most representative, which is a 5-book poem telling the tragedy of a young Trojan hero Troilus, who fell in love with Criseyde. But shortly after they became lovers, Criseyde was returned by the Trojans to her father, a traitor who had left Troy for the camp of the Greeks. Criseyde fell in love with the Greek warrior Diomede and Troilus died in a fight with the Greeks.

c) The English phase, or the phase of realism, in which his masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales* was created. We shall give a more detailed introduction to this important poem below.

2. His Major Work—*The Canterbury Tales* (1386-1400)

In *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer presents a picturesque panorama of his contemporary England and shows his realistic tendency, subtle irony and freedom of views, all of which had no equal in the English literature before the 16th century. Although Chaucer is not entirely free from medieval prejudices, they take a very inconsiderable place in the tales. Chaucer believes in the right of man to earthly happiness and is opposed to superstitions and a blind belief in fate. He praises man's energy, intellect, quick wit and the love for life, and mocks at the Roman Catholic authorities who exploit the English people. All these mark him as an *avant-garde* of the coming Age of Renaissance in England.

1) The Dramatic Structure of *The Canterbury Tales*

The General Prologue: The book was planned as a collection of stories heard by Chaucer as a participant of a pilgrimage. There is the General Prologue at the beginning to brief the reader about the time, place, and what happened that led to telling tales among a group of pilgrims. But what interests the reader most and has always been considered as Chaucer's great success is the vivid and realistic descriptions in the General Prologue of all

Pilgrims leaving Canterbury from a manuscript of *The Siege of Thebes*, attached to the unfinished *Canterbury Tales*.

the pilgrims, their appearances, manners and personalities. They were a group on their way to Canterbury to pay respect to the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket. It was springtime. The author stopped for the night at the Tabard Inn of Southwark, a suburb of London, where he met this group of 29 people from all walks of life, including a knight, a squire, a prioress, a friar, a merchant, a clerk, a sergeant of the law, a Franklin, a doctor, the wife of Bath, a plowman, a miller, a summoner, a pardoner, and so on. They had met at the inn and planned to go together to Canterbury. Chaucer and the inn host joined them. The host, a merry man, made himself head of the group and proposed that each pilgrim tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. He would then judge and give a prize to the one who told the best story.

The Tales: After the General Prologue, the story-telling begins. Here, Chaucer places a prologue before each tale to further introduce the person who tells that particular story, and the occasion that leads to the telling of it.

In this way the tales are neatly organised into a whole and from time to time Chaucer, the author/narrator, puts in his poignant, or ironical remarks both on the story-teller and on the tale, which greatly enhances the dramatic effect of the work.

But when Chaucer died, the poem was left unfinished, with only 24 stories in all. Although the work is incomplete, what we have is already a piece of great creation that marks a very important stage in the development of the English poetry.

2) The Artistic Features of *The Canterbury Tales*

Realistic Presentation of Characters and Contemporary Life: First of all we must mention Chaucer's realistic presentation of characters. The poet tries to give a comprehensive picture of the English society of his time and arranges to present a colorful gallery of pilgrims that covers a great range of social life. Not only they represent the classes they come from, but each also possesses an individual personality. In each prologue leading to a tale, Chaucer gives a vivid portrayal of the story-teller's appearance, manners, way of speaking, and personality. Thus, the characters become as important a part of the poem as the tales told by them. Among the most often cited examples are, for instance, the Wife of Bath and the Miller, and their tales.

Alice, a wife from Bath belonged to the plebeian class who had married five husbands. She was a shrewd woman, always holding the domineering position in her house, which she believed to be the most important for a married woman. Her first three husbands were all old, rich and physically weak. Once Alice got their lands and wealth, she no longer made any effort to please them, but treated them like a nagging shrew. Her fourth husband was a playboy. She suffered some bad treatment in his hands, but she in turn gave him the hell by letting him believe she had been unfaithful to him. Her present husband, the fifth one, was an Oxford clerk, who was sly and domineering. She was twice his age, and was greatly attracted to this man. But even in their honey-moon, she found he despised women and read only anti-women literature. To mock at her, he even deliberately read to her tales of murderesses and of females with loose morals and behaviour. Naturally, they quarreled and fell to blows. During one domestic fight she pretended to be struck to death, which frightened her husband and thus she gained for herself the sovereignty she desired in their house.

The tale she told is an echo of this ideology of hers. It is about a knight who committed the crime of rape, and as a condition to escape punishment

he was forced to look for what a woman desired most. He was helped to the right answer by an old and ugly hag and promised marriage in return. The wedding was all agony to the knight and he openly told his spouse so. But as soon as he admitted his debt to his wife and ready to submit to her, she changed into a fair and good woman and they lived in perfect joy ever after.

The Miller was a very coarse character. His tale comes after the Knight's very refined story. When all the gentlefolk praised the Knight highly, the Miller, who was very drunk at the time, announced in an alcoholic stutter that he was going to tell a story. His tale is a fabliau, a story of common characters involved in gross and indecent events. A rich old carpenter John was cuckolded by his young and pretty wife Alisoun, who was seduced by a clerk named Nicholas and had carried on this illicit relationship with him. Another clerk Absalom also desired Alisoun and went to her bedroom window each night to sing songs. John was so kind that he found nothing wrong about this singing of songs. So Absalom continued his wooing of Alisoun outside of the window. One evening when John was away and Nicholas was in bedroom with the wife, Absalom came and begged Alisoun for a kiss. Alisoun put her rear side out of the window for the kiss. Upon discovering the insult, Absalom returned with a red-hot poker to take revenge. He asked for another kiss, and this time Nicholas put out his buttocks. Absalom branded his buttocks with the hot iron. Nicholas screamed in pain. This tale is very much in the fashion of Boccaccio's tales in *Decameron*, in which are comic events showing how the rich foolish old husbands are deceived by the clever young lovers. But, here Chaucer emphasises the poetic justice and the deceivers are justly punished.

The Miller was a bull-like man, big-boned and muscular. He was ugly-looking with a broad, red beard, a hairy wart on his nose, and his nostrils were wide and black. He was also very coarse. Whenever he opened his mouth, it was always to tell dirty stories. Naturally the tale he told was such an indecent one, which shows the gross side of the life of the common people. However, the tale is full of energy and vitality that represents typically the Renaissance spirit against the religious bondage set upon human pursuit of earthly happiness. But, one thing we must add to our reading of this tale and all the other tales by Chaucer. Namely such tales by Chaucer are not obscene though very earthy in their humour. The Miller's tale, in fact, makes an entertaining contrast to the chivalric romance of the Knight's before it. Chaucer deals with the "facts of life" in such an unembarrassed and healthy fashion that only the most Puritanical mind can find fault with the story.

Chaucer's Humour: *The Canterbury Tales* wins readers with its humour. Many English novelists and playwrights are distinguished by the humour they show in their works. Chaucer is one of the most prominent humourists among them. He is well-skilled in mild and subtle irony to create humourous effects. Although he lived in close association with the court officials and the upper class people, he was a broad-minded humanist and had sympathy for people at large. Therefore, he treats his characters kindly on the whole, using gentle satire and irony to criticise vanity, ill-manners, deceptive tricks and all sorts of follies and human weaknesses. In depicting the wife of Bath, Chaucer uses satire openly to expose her coarse, pragmatic and shrewd nature. He can also rise to very bitter satire against the real evil people such as his portrayal of the pardoner and the summoner. But when it comes to the prioress, Chaucer chooses subtle irony to imply that though a nun, she also has earthly desires and is a little hypocritical when over-acting her charity and sympathy toward injured animals. She was an extremely sensitive person, her smile was coy, and she spoke daintily in French, following the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe in England, and "French in the Paris style she did not know". When she ate, she was careful not to dip her fingers too deep in the sauce or to drop even a morsel on her breast. And she would cry over a mouse caught in a trap or weep if her dog should die or be beaten by someone. Nun as she was, she paid great attention to her looks, especially her head dress and clothes. To finish his description of her Chaucer wrote: "She wore a coral trinket on her arm, / A set of beads, the gaudies tricked in green, / Whence hung a golden brooch of brightest sheen / On which there first was graven a crowned A, / And lower, *Amor vincit omnia*." The Latin here means: "Love conquers all." This motto inscribed on her brooch brings the portraying to a climax. As a nun, she should love God and receive Love from God, which is called the divine love. But the reader is never sure whether by wearing such a motto on her brooch, the prioress is thinking of secular or divine love. One possible implication is that she also desires secular love, including love between man and woman. There goes Chaucer's subtle irony and satire of the hypocrisy of the Catholic church and its clergy.

Unity Through a Framed Story: *The Canterbury Tales* is a framed story. Although the story-tellers are very different and the stories are diverse, a unity is achieved through the device of the framed story, that is Chaucer's invention of a pilgrimage as the occasion of all the story-telling and thus makes it realistic. Also, the pilgrimage frame offers the possibility for

comparison and contrast of characters and their interplay. In this way, the poem presents both vivid characters and a multiple-viewed realistic picture of the English society of Chaucer's time. This frame consists of the General Prologue, short sections telling things which happened on the way, prologues to individual tales, and a few interruptions by one character or another in the middle of a tale.

Metrical Scheme: The metrical scheme of *The Canterbury Tales* is Chaucer's chief contribution to English poetry. He is the poet who introduced to England the rhymed stanzas of many kinds from French poetry, especially the rhymed couplet of iambic pentameter, which is also called the heroic couplet. As a result, he changed the alliterative verse of the Anglo-Saxons to metrical verse which has since been used and developed by generation after generation of English poets till today.

3. Chaucer's Contributions

Chaucer learned from both French and Latin poetry and then worked out a unique style for the English poetry that had absorbed nourishments from the more advanced European poetry of the time and at the same time reserved its Anglo-Saxon poetic features. And the realism and humanistic concerns demonstrated in his works looked forward to the coming English Renaissance.

Chaucer's literary career was also closely related with the development of English. There were several dialects in the spoken English of Chaucer's time. But because he used the English of the London dialect to compose poetry, it became a literary language, that is a language rich and expressive enough to use for literary purposes. Today, we call the English used and developed by Chaucer and his contemporaries Middle English, which was the foundation of modern English.

Review Questions

1. What was the social and class reality of the Anglo-Norman Period?
2. Tell the three divisions of romances according to subject matter and give an example of the Matter of Britain.
3. Name two more well-known writers of this period and their achievements besides Chaucer and his literary works.

4. Say as much as you know about Chaucer's life and works.
5. Comment on the artistic features of *The Canterbury Tales*.
6. Sum up Chaucer's achievements and contributions.

Quiz

I. Fill in the blanks: (30%)

1. The first settlers of the British Isles were _____, and Britain got its name from a branch of this people called _____. But later they were driven to live in _____, _____ and _____.
2. The _____, _____ and _____ were _____ tribes originally living on the Continent. They moved to the British Isles and became the ancestors of the _____ people.
3. The most important event of the Old English Period was _____, which took place in the year _____.
4. The Roman Catholic Church sent _____ to England in 597 _____ the English people to Catholicism.
5. Name two poems of this period apart from *Beowulf*: _____, and _____.
6. *Beowulf* is an epic of _____ lines, and it tells the events that took place on _____ before they moved to the British Isles.
7. After the Anglo-Saxon English took in loan words from _____ and _____ and lost most of its _____ and many of its grammar rules, it was called _____.
8. Romance can be divided into three kinds according to subject matter. They are _____, _____ and _____.
9. Romances of the English subject are tales about _____ and his _____.
10. John Wyclif was a translator of _____, William Langland wrote _____ and the most famous English ballads are those about _____.

II. Mark the following statements as true (T) or false (F): (10%)

☐ 1. The two centers of Christian culture in the Old English Period was in Canterbury and Northumbria.

☐ 2. Caedmon belonged to Northumbrian School, whereas the

Venerable Bede was a member of the Canterbury Abbey in south England.

☐ 3. The first English national epic poem is *Widsith*.

☐ 4. Old English poetry is distinguished by its use of alliteration and kennings.

☐ 5. Chaucer is the greatest lyrical poet of the Middle English Period.

☐ 6. *The Canterbury Tales* is Chaucer's masterpiece, but it is unfinished with only 24 tales written.

☐ 7. Modern English is developed from the London dialect of the Middle English Period, which is a great contribution made by Chaucer to the English language.

☐ 8. Most of the English popular ballads have their origin in the French folklore.

☐ 9. The Normans were interested in the Cycle of King Arthur because they wanted to prove they were lawful heirs to the Celtic ancestors of Britain.

☐ 10. Chaucer's humanistic ideas anticipate the English Renaissance.

III. Explain the following literary terms: (15%)

1. epic
2. alliteration
3. iambic pentameter
4. romance
5. ballad

IV. Choose one from each of the following two groups of questions and write a short essay of about 300 words to the first and about 500 words to the second: (45%)

Group One: (20%)

1. Give a historical review of the Old English Period.
2. Say something about the transition from Old English to Middle English and the historical elements that had brought about this transition.

_____

_____

_____

Group Two: (25%)

1. Analyse the theme(s) and artistic features of *Beowulf*.
2. Comment on Chaucer's achievements and contributions with examples from his works.

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