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PART I

ENGLISH LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

English Literature in the Old and Middle Ages

(449-1485)

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Old English literature, or Anglo-Saxon literature, began in the period after the settlement of the Teutonic tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes about 449 AD and ended after the Norman Conquest in 1066. The Angles settled in the central part of the island, calling their new home Angle-land, then shortened into England. The greatest Old English poem is *Beowulf*.

Beowulf

Beowulf, the first and greatest English epic, dates to the seventh century. It tells us a story of a brave young man, Beowulf, who is from southern Sweden to help Hrothgar, King of the Danes. The poem consists of 3182 lines and the author is unknown. *Beowulf* is a valuable narrative poem, which records the valuable custom of that time and gives us an interesting picture of life in those old days. The epic tells us of fierce fights and brave deeds of the leader and the sufferings of his men. It is mainly about Beowulf's three major adventures and praises the bravery, keeping promise, and loyalty.

Hrothgar is in trouble because his great hall, called Heorot, is visited at night by the terrible monster Grendel, which lives in a lake and comes to kill and devours many of Hrothgar's warriors while they sleep. Beowulf leaves his homeland with his king's permission to help Hrothgar. One night, Beowulf waits secretly for the monster in the hall and attacks it. Beowulf pulls Grendel's arm off with his bare hands. Grendel runs to his home and slowly dies.

The Grendel's mother comes to the hall in revenge for Grendel's defeat. Beowulf attacks her and follows her to the bottom of the lake. There he kills Grendel's mother. He returns to Heorot, where Hrothgar gives Beowulf many gifts.

Later in his life, Beowulf is the king of his people. In order to defend his country against a fire-breathing creature, Beowulf and his warriors come to fight the creature. Although he kills the animal, Beowulf is badly wounded and dies. The poem ends with a sorrowful description of Beowulf's funeral fire.

The original poem written in old language is not easy to read, but *Beowulf* has its own value. The poem is of no rhyme. Instead, each half-line is joined to the other by alliteration. **Alliteration** is the repetitions of the same consonant sounds in a line, especially at the beginning of words. Here are two lines of it.

Of men he was the mildest and most beloved,
To his kin the kindest, keenest to praise.

Another feature is the use of a lot of metaphors and understatements in the poem in which things are described indirectly and in combinations of words. A ship is not only a ship. It is a sea-goer, a sea-boat, a sea-wood, or a wave-floater.

Epic is a long narrative poem that records the adventures of a hero, whose exploits are important to the history of a nation.

Middle English literature, or Medieval English Literature, refers to the literature written from about 1066 to about 1500. In 1066, Duke William II of Normandy (later known as William the Conqueror) launched the Norman Conquest of England by defeating the Anglo-Saxons at the Battle of Hastings, subsequently becoming William I of England. The Norman Conquest marked the end of the Anglo-Saxon period.

After the Norman Conquest, three languages co-existed in England. French became the official language used by the king and Norman lords; Latin became the principal tongue of church affairs and in universities. And Old English was spoken only by the common English people.

The greatest poet of the time was Geoffrey Chaucer who is often called the father of English poetry. As we know, the language had changed a great deal in the seven hundred years since the time of *Beowulf* and it is much easier to read Chaucer than to read anything written in Old English.

In the medieval period, the prevailing literary form was the romance. **Romance** was a long composition, sometimes in verse, sometimes in prose, describing the life and adventures of a noble hero. The central character of romances was the knight, a man of noble birth skilled in the use of weapons. The knight was commonly described as riding forth to seek adventures, or fighting for his lord in battle. He was devoted to the church and the king.

The subjects of English romances mainly deal with three types of historical material: the matter of Rome and Greece, the matter of France, and the matter of Britain which refers to Arthurian stories. The famous romance is adventures of *King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table*. One of the main subjects is the search for The Holy Grail. Another subject is Arthur's battles against his enemies, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* which is one of the very popular stories.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

The poem's author is anonymous. Sir Gawain is the King Arthur's nephew, one of the Knights of the Round Table. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the most accomplished example of medieval romance and a poem of rich psychological and moral interest. It tells of the adventures of one of King Arthur's Knights in a struggle against an enemy with magic powers as well as great strength and cunning. Sir Gawain finishes the adventure with all honors.

In the first canto, Green Knight challenges the bravest knight and Gawain accepts the challenge. He takes the battle ax to cut off the Green Knight's head. In the second canto, Gawain keeps his promise to look for the Green Chapel and lives in the castle near the chapel. The third canto shows the life of Gawain spent in the castle to get three kisses and the girdle within three days. In the fourth canto, Gawain is brought to the Green Chapel. The Green Knight wounds him because he conceals the green girdle.

Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400)

INTRODUCTION

Geoffrey Chaucer, known as the father of English literature, is widely considered the greatest poet of the Middle Ages. He is regarded as the first realist in English literature because he gives us the ordinary daily life of the 14th century. It is Chaucer alone who, for the first time in English literature, presented to us a comprehensive realistic picture of the English society of his time and created a whole gallery of vivid characters from all walks of life in his masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*.



Chaucer is often called the father of English poetry. His contribution to English poetry lies chiefly in the fact that he introduced from France the rhymed stanzas of various types to English poetry instead of the old alliterative verse, especially **heroic couplet**, a verse form with iambic pentameter, which rhymes in pairs or couplets.

As a first realistic writer, Chaucer is considered as the founder of English realism because he shows us the realistic pictures of 14th-century English society in his *The Canterbury Tales*.

As a forerunner of humanism, Chaucer praises man's energy, intellect, quick wit and love of life. His tales expose and satirize the evils of the time.

His language is vivid and exact. Chaucer is the first great poet who wrote in the current English language. He did much in making the dialect of London the foundation for modern English speech. Chaucer is recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the first author to use many common English words in his writings. So we can say he is the master of the English language.

Chaucer was born about 1340 in London. He was the son of a well-to-do wine merchant who had connections with the Court. The poet is said to have studied at Cambridge and Oxford. His learning was wide in scope. He obtained a good knowledge of Latin, French and Italian. In 1359, in the early stages of the Hundred Years' War, Chaucer went to France and he was captured in 1360. Edward III paid £16 for his ransom and Chaucer was released. After his return, he married Philippa, a lady-in-waiting to Edward III's queen. Several times he was sent to the Continent on diplomatic missions, two of which took him to Italy. Then he was appointed Controller of customs at London. He died in 1400 and was buried in Westminster Abbey in

London. Chaucer is the first writer who was interred in the area now known as “Poets’ Corner.”

Chaucer went to Italy twice and was influenced by Italian Renaissance, especially by Dante and Boccaccio. His major works include *The Book of the Duchess* (1370), *The Parliament of Fowls* (1380), *The House of Fame* (1374-1384), *Troilus and Criseyde* (1385), *The Legend of Good Women* (1385), and his masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales*.

SELECTED READING

The Canterbury Tales

Overview

The *Canterbury Tales* is a framed story which is called one of the monumental works in English literature. The plan of this narrative poem shows the evident influence of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. According to Chaucer’s plan, he will tell us over 120 tales, more than the number of *Decameron*, but he has only finished *General Prologue* and 24 tales, of which four are incomplete. However, *The Canterbury Tales* shows us the real society of the fourteenth-century England. The gallery of portraits in the *General Prologue* covers almost the whole range of fourteenth-century occupations and professions. And the tales deal with important social and domestic issues. The poem as a whole gives a vivid and comprehensive picture of the social conditions of the 14th century England.

Chaucer meets a party of twenty-nine other pilgrims at the Tabard Inn on their way to Canterbury. He joins the company to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket. At the suggestion of the host of the inn, the pilgrims agree to tell stories to pass the time on their journey on horseback from London to Canterbury. Each of them will tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. The best story-teller shall be treated with a fine supper at general expense at the end. The host is to be the judge of the contest.

In the famous *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer describes the pilgrims for us in great detail, from which we get to know the pilgrims themselves. Most of them, such as the merchant, the lawyer, the cook, the sailor, the plowman, and the miller, are ordinary people, but each of them can be recognized as a real person with his or her own character. One of the most enjoyable characters is the Wife of Bath. She tells her story to manage her five husbands strictly.

The selection is from the *General Prologue* which provides a framework

for the tales. The poet begins his poem with a flowery description of the English countryside in the spring time. All the birds are prodded into participation in the processes of nature and sing all the night through. Then people have been stirred by the beautiful nature to go off on pilgrimages. The description of the rain, the west wind, the sun, the birds and human beings gives us beautiful and harmonious scenery in April.

General Prologue

(Excerpt)

As soon as April pierces to the root
 The drought of March, and bathes each bud and shoot
 Through every vein of sap with gentle showers
 From whose engendering liquor spring the flowers;
 When Zephyrus¹ have breathed softly all about
 Inspiring every wood and field to sprout,
 And in the zodiac² the youthful sun
 His journey halfway through the Ram³ has run;
 When little birds are busy with their song
 Who sleep with open eyes the whole night long
 Life stirs their hearts and tingles in them so,
 Then off as pilgrims people long to go,
 And palmers⁴ to set out for distant strands
 And foreign shrines renowned in many lands.
 And specially in England people ride
 To Canterbury from every countryside

1 Zephyrus: the west wind

2 Zodiac: an area of the sky through which the sun, moon and most of the planets appear to move, or the representation of this area in the form of a usually circular drawing. The area of sky is divided into twelve equal parts, each of which has a name, is connected with a time of year, and is represented by a symbol.

3 Ram: Ram is one of the signs of the Zodiac. The sun is supposed to run through the sign of the Ram annually from March 21st to April 21st, so the sun is young.

4 palmers: pilgrims to foreign countries

To visit there the blessed martyred saint¹
Who gave them strength when they were sick and faint.

In Southwark at the Tabard one spring day
It happened, as I stopped there on my way,
Myself a pilgrim with a heart devout
Ready for Canterbury to set out,
At night came all of twenty-nine assorted
Travellers, and to that same inn resorted,
Who by a turn of fortune chanced to fall
In fellowship together, and they were all
Pilgrims who had it in their minds to ride
Toward Canterbury. The stables doors were wide,
The rooms were large, and we enjoyed the best,
And shortly, when the sun had gone to rest,
I had so talked with each that presently
I was a member of their company
And promised to rise early the next day
To start, as I shall show, upon our way.

But none the less, while I have time and space,
Before this tale has gone a further pace,
I should in reason tell you the condition
Of each of them, his rank and his position,
And also what array they all were in;
And so then, with a knight I will begin.

1 saint: Here Saint refers to St. Thomas à Becket, murdered in Canterbury cathedral in 1170. In February 1173, he was formally canonized by Pope Alexander III.

QUESTIONS

- 1 What does *liquor* refer to here?
- 2 What makes wood and field to sprout?
- 3 In the seventh line, why does the author use “youthful” to describe the sun?
- 4 Why do the little birds sleep with open eyes during the whole night?
- 5 Why do the pilgrims long to set out?
- 6 What is the significance of the setting of the pilgrimage?
- 7 How does the springtime journey in *The Canterbury Tales* compare to traditional Chinese ideas about humans living in harmony with nature?

ENGLISH BALLADS

INTRODUCTION

During the fifteenth century, the continuous wars affected the development of English literature. Yet popular ballads and songs were widely spread in England and Scotland. **Ballad** is a narrative poem written in four-line stanzas, characterized by swift action and narrated in a direct style. Usually only the second and fourth lines rhyme. Ballads are anonymous narrative songs that have been preserved by oral transmission. The most famous English ballads at that time centered on the stories about a legendary outlaw called Robin Hood, who was described as a popular folk figure in the late-medieval period, and continues to be widely represented in literature, films and television. English ballads include historical, legendary, and humorous ballads. The following selection, *Get Up and Bar the Door*, is a good example of humorous ballad.

SELECTED READING

Get Up and Bar the Door

Overview

This is a medieval Scots ballad about a common life between a husband and wife. The ballad shows us a battle of wills between a husband, who tries to maintain his power, and wife, who refuses to be treated like a doormat. Both

of them are too stubborn to bar the door. The song begins with the wife busy in her cooking. As the wind picks up, the husband asks his wife to close and bar the door. They make a pact that the person who speaks first must bar the door, and the door remains open. At midnight two thieves enter the house and eat the puddings that the wife has just made. The husband and wife watch them, but still neither speaks. Amazed, one of the thieves proposes to kiss the wife.



Finally, the husband shouts “Will ye kiss my wife before my eye/And scald me with pudding-broth?” The wife, having won the pact, tells the husband, “Goodman, you’ve spoken the foremost word; Get up and bar the door.”

It fell about the Martinmas time¹,
And a gay time it was then,
When our goodwife² got puddings to make,
And she’s boiled them in the pan.

The wind so cold blew south and north,
And blew into the floor;
Quoth our goodman³ to our goodwife,
“Go out and bar the door.”

“My hand is in my hussyfscap⁴,
Goodman, as ye may see;
If it should not be barr’d this hundred year,
It’s not be barr’d by me.”

They made a paction⁵ ’tween them two,
They made it firm and sure,

1 Martinmas time: the feast of St. Martin, Nov. 11th of each year

2 goodwife: wife

3 goodman: husband

4 hussyfscap: a small case for needles, thread, etc.

5 paction: pact, i.e., agreement

That the first word whoe'er should speak,
Should rise and bar the door.

Then by there came two gentlemen,
At twelve o'clock at night,
And they could neither see house nor hall,
Not coal, nor candlelight.

"Now whether is this a rich man's house,
Or whether is it a poor?"
But ne'er a word would one of them speak,
For barring of the door.

And first they ate white puddings,
And then they ate the black;
Though much thought the goodwife to herself,
Yet ne'er a word she spake.

Then said the one unto the other,
"Here, man, take ye ma¹ knife;
Do you take off² the old man's beard,
And I'll kiss the goodwife."

"But there's no water in the house,
And what shall we do then?"
"What ails ye at the pudding-broth³,
That boils into the pan?"

O, up then started our goodman,

1 ma: my

2 take off: to shave off

3 What ails ye at the pudding-broth: What's the matter with the pudding broth? Why not use the pudding-broth?

An angry man was he;
“Will ye kiss my wife before my eye,
And scald me with pudding-broth?”

O, up then started our goodwife,
Made three skips on the floor;
“Goodman, you’ve spoken the foremost word;¹
Get up and bar the door.”

QUESTIONS

- 1 What is the agreement made between the husband and wife?
- 2 Why could the two gentlemen neither see the house, nor hall, nor candlelight?
- 3 What did they do after they ate the puddings?
- 4 Why was the goodman so angry at last?
- 5 What is the rhyme scheme of the poem?
- 6 What kind of life does this ballad reflect?
- 7 What is the tone of the ballad?
- 8 How does the couple’s stubborn fight over the door show that compromise is essential for harmony?

EXERCISES OF CHAPTER I

I Fill in the following blanks.

- 1 Different tribes of Teutons include _____, _____, and _____.
- 2 _____ is the oldest poem in the English language which is called English national epic.
- 3 After the Norman Conquest, three languages co-existed in England. _____ became the official language used by the king and the Norman lords; _____ was spoken in church affairs and in universities, and _____ was spoken only by the common English people.

1 You’ve spoken the foremost word: You have been the first to speak.

II Find the relevant match from Column B for each item in Column A.

Column A	Column B
1 () Geoffrey Chaucer	A. <i>Angle-land</i>
2 () popular ballad	B. <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i>
3 () the best of Arthurian romances	C. <i>Get Up and Bar the Door</i>
4 () the oldest English epic	D. <i>The Canterbury Tales</i>
5 () England	E. <i>Beowulf</i>

III Choose the best answer for each statement.

- The Canterbury Tales* is written for the greater part in _____ couplets.
A. epic B. heroic C. narrative D. lyric
- Chaucer died on the 25th of October 1400, and was buried in _____.
A. Italy B. France C. Oxford D. Westminster Abbey
- Geoffrey Chaucer is the founder of the English _____.
A. romantic poetry B. realistic literature
C. classical novels D. heroic epic
- "When little birds are busy with their song/Who sleep with open eyes the whole night long/Life stirs their hearts and tingles in them so," (From *The Canterbury Tales*). This means the birds cannot sleep because they _____.
A. keep singing the whole night
B. are excited by the beauty of nature
C. have a heart full of love
D. are busy with picking seeds

IV Answer the following questions.

- What are the main contributions of Chaucer to British literature?
- What are the features of *Beowulf*?
- List the Chinese literary classics and world-renowned Chinese writers before 1485.